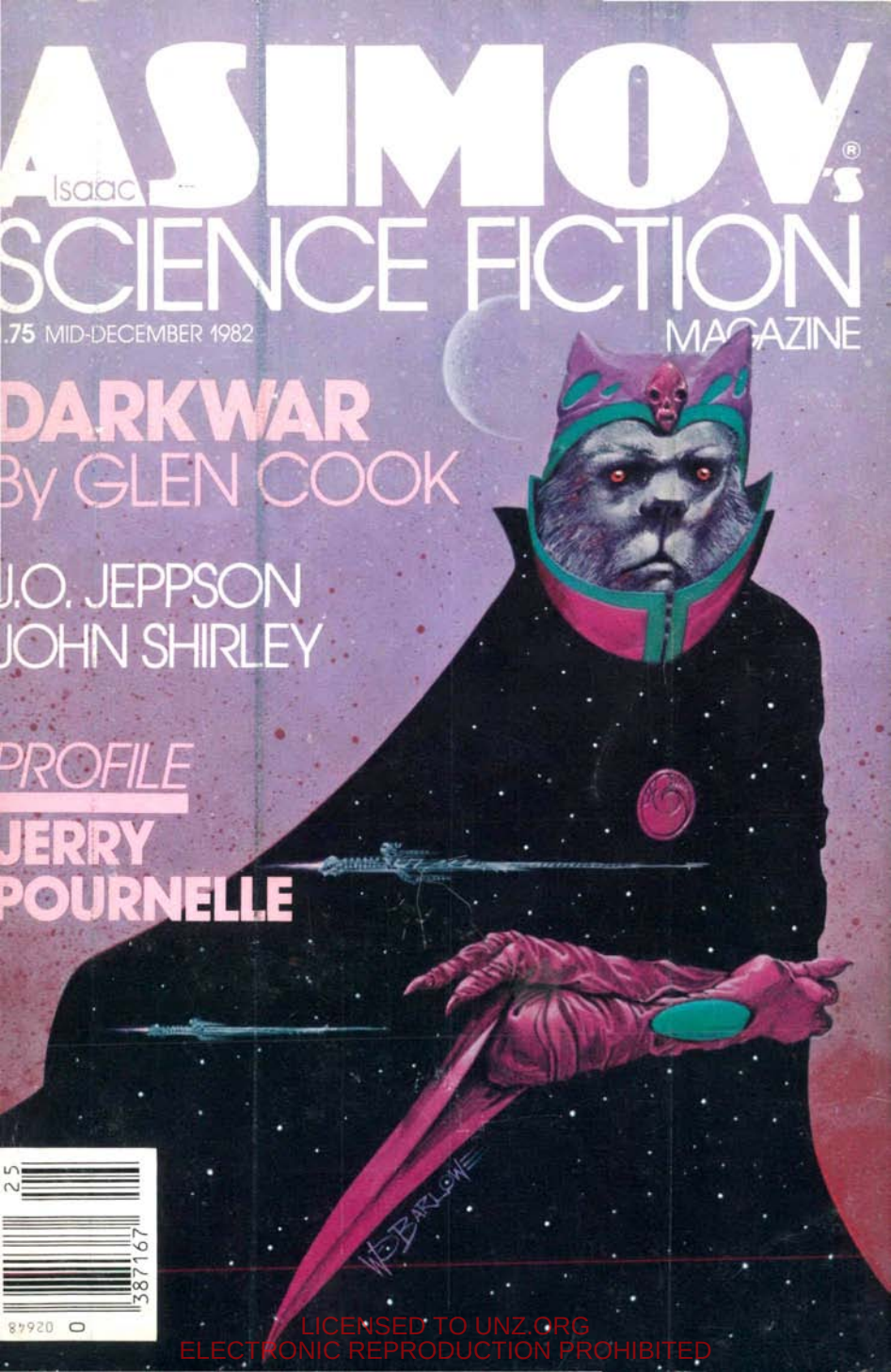

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ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

Vol. 6 No. 13 (whole no. 60)
Mid-December 1982
Next issue on sale
December 21, 1982

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Published 13 times a year by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.75 a copy ($1.95 for the December issue); annual subscription of thirteen issues $16.25 in the United States and U.S. possessions; in all other countries $19.75, payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all correspondence about them: P.O. Box 1933, Marion OH 43305. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10017. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc.

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Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing office. POSTMASTER: send form 3579 to IAsfm, Box 1933, Marion OH 43306. ISSN 0162-2188.

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UP FRONT

by Kathleen Moloney

This month in the front of the magazine we have our own version of "Point/Counterpoint." It all started with Charles Platt's very revealing Profile of Jerry Pournelle, an extraordinarily successful SF writer known almost as well for his politics as for his prose. As you can imagine, Pournelle is not in the least bit shy about making his political views known. As you can also imagine, our own Dr. Asimov takes issue with many of Pournelle's views of the past, the present, and the future, and since an arm-wrestling contest between the two of them seemed inappropriate—not to mention impractical—we invited the Good Doctor to state his case in the Editorial. The combination of these two pieces is thought-provoking and virtually guaranteed to provoke arguments.

Considerably less political but nonetheless stimulating are the stories we've served up in this, the last issue of 1982. On the light side we applaud the return of Janet Jeppson and her merry band of Pshrinks Anonymous with "The Mysterious Cure" and John Shirley, whose "Quill Tripstickler Hits Bottim" proves yet again that it is hard to get good help these days.

The more serious (but not somber) stories demonstrate once more the infinite variety of the SF genre and the imaginative powers of those who write it. Our cover story, Glen Cook's "Darkwar," is almost mesmerizing in its drama and its detail; James Killus's "The Ballad of Jake the Snake and the Rock 'n' Roll Kid" is a kind of stereophonic science fiction; "Heart in Winter," by Rand B. Lee, who is fast becoming one our most prolific contributors, is an eerie journey into the mind of a multiple personality. The only newcomer to these pages in this issue is Sheila Finch-Rayner. In "A Long Way Home" she makes a very impressive and affecting debut.

And happy new year from all of us regulars at *IAsfm*—Martin, Gardner, Baird Searles, Gerry Mooney, Merl Reagle, Isaac Asimov, Shawna McCarthy, and me. ●

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EDITORIAL

VIOLENCE AND INCOMPETENCE

by Isaac Asimov

Somewhere in this issue, you will find a Charles Platt interview with Jerry Pournelle. In the course of the interview, Jerry says: "Isaac Asimov has an asinine motto, 'Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.' "

I presume it does sound asinine to some people.

A young man once said to me, rather belligerently, "Dr. Asimov, if violence is the last refuge of the incompetent, why is there so much violence in the world?"

"Alas, young man," I said, "it is because there are so many incompetents in the world."

You see, violence is such an easy solution, especially if you're big and burly, and have a gun, and your opponent is, and has, none of these things. You just beat him up and, possibly, kill him, and there's an end to your opponent.

Suppose, though, it's not a human being you're trying to kill but an *idea*. If you're truly competent, you can beat an idea with another, possibly better, idea. If you're not competent, you may be forced to violence out of sheer frustration, and, as is true with anything an incompetent does, it often doesn't work.

Jesus of Nazareth had ideas that were obnoxious to those in power, so they took care of him with apparent permanence. They crucified him. I don't think anyone will maintain that that was a competent way of eradicating his ideas.

Christianity took over the Empire, not because it defeated the pagans in war, or slaughtered them in ambush—indeed, violence was in the other direction. It won out because its ideas were better suited to its times than those of the pagans.

In later centuries, when Christianity tried to nail down its victory by violence against "heretics," it sometimes achieved its aims but (in my view) inefficiently; and it very often did not achieve them at all. A hundred years of savage warfare between Catholics and Protestants wiped out neither; a thousand years of savage warfare between Christians and

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Muslims wiped out neither.

Let me repeat: Violence exists, and it is an easy way of seeming to solve a problem. It is, however, an inefficient way, and frequently one that does not work. Anyone who can't think of anything better and insists on using violence is incompetent—even if he is as "successful" as Alexander the Great was.

After all, Alexander's Empire did not survive his death. That the Roman Empire existed as long as it did was not the result of its successful wars but rather the result of its development of a successful system of government. The Roman law, not the Roman legion, was the true secret of Roman competence. And when the laws lost their grip, the legions couldn't save the Empire.

I believe the rule works in literature as well.

Stories that are full of violence can be very popular, just as violence itself is, but I suspect they lack staying power. The non-violent mystery featuring a rational non-violent detective appears passé now, yet the Sherlock Holmes stories first appeared a century ago and are still popular. Will the same be said of the evanescent reams of "tough guy" detectives? What will the score be a century hence? I'll not be there to check, but I have no fears. My bet is on the Holmeses, the Poirots, the Wolfes, and the little gray cells over the nameless shamuses and their big black guns.

I have used my motto concerning violence in my own stories. They are generally nonviolent, and the resolutions are almost always achieved through the force of a "better idea."

I have written four mystery novels, and in each of the four there is but one murder. In three of them, that one murder takes place before the story begins. In the fourth, it takes place off-stage. My mystery short stories rarely involve any form of violence.

And the same goes for my science fiction stories. The result is that I don't make the best-seller lists—but I stay in print, and I am popular with publishers. I am playing for the long run (not deliberately, I must admit, but just because I hate violence, and it has worked out that way). If this be asininity, I am satisfied with it.

That brings me to *The Foundation Trilogy*, which is, by all odds, my most successful work of fiction, and which (together with my new novel, *Foundation's Edge*, and any subsequent sequels I may live long enough to do) will, I am quite certain, be selling long after I have passed on to the big word-processor in the sky.

It is in *The Foundation Trilogy* that one of the characters,

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Salvor Hardin, says "Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent," and the entire series of stories is designed to demonstrate that fact. (I did not do this deliberately, to be sure, since I write too quickly to do anything deliberately, but I do follow my instincts, and I think those are sound.)

This, in fact, is the true significance of the *Trilogy* and the reason for its staying power.

People have given it credit for at least two inventions. I have been told, for instance, that in the *Trilogy* I invented the "all-human Galaxy" as opposed to the delightfully diverse life forms that people the Galaxies invented by E. E. Smith and John W. Campbell.

I have also been told that I invented the "historical novel of the future." The *Trilogy* may not be the first to demonstrate

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the concept, but it is the first to develop it in detail.

Both inventions, however cute they may be, nevertheless cannot possibly (to my way of thinking) represent the real significance of the stories.

The real significance lies in the careful working out of the theme concerning violence and incompetence. I have one crisis worked out by the application of the idea of balance of power, another by the idea of the power of religion over the state, still another by the force of economic domination. The Mule loses out, not because someone else, who is quicker on the mental trigger, can shoot him down but because of his own desire for unforced love.

In those cases where violence does take place (and there are indeed wars and deaths in the *Trilogy*) these things never decide anything. The resolution takes place despite the violence and even in a direction against the violence.

Mind you, I do not for one moment think that my readers, as they turn the pages, say to themselves, "Gee, how cleverly Asimov is demonstrating his anti-violence thesis." I'm almost sure they never give that a thought at all, any more than I did, consciously, when I wrote the *Trilogy*.

However, the thesis sinks in, unconsciously, for those people who have a tendency to thought and competence—a classification that tends to include the generality of my readers—and gives them pleasure. In many cases, they reread the *Trilogy* (at least, so they tell me), and it can't be for the surprise endings, which are never a surprise after the first time. They can only reread it for renewed satisfaction with the presented view of humanity.

All this pleases me so much.

I might, if I could bring myself to do so, add reams of violence to my stories, or sex, or various other forms of sensationalism. I'm sure that no one is going to say I lack the literary expertise to do so, if it were my determination to do so. And if I did, there is at least a chance I might gather more readers, make the best-seller lists, or big movie sales.

But I want *my* readers, the minority of competents, who would like to see the world proceed on a rational course, without war and violence. We may lose, of course—but we may win. And that is as much as we can expect, for in a world in which violence now means nuclear weapons, germ warfare, smart missiles and laser beams, those who view violence as a solution *must* lose. ●

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

STARBURST
By Frederik Pohl
Del Rey, $12.50.

In the way of good writers with lengthy careers, Frederik Pohl has certainly kept up with the times. Most such, however, keep a kind of base sensibility of the period in which they began writing, overlaid with whatever changes they have made in their art over the years.

Pohl, on the other hand, made his initial splash in the 1950s, and is considered an epitomal figure of that *Galaxy*-dominated period (*The Space Merchants* et al.). But his recent work has the quality of someone who began writing at least a decade later; if you somehow knew the field without knowing Pohl, you'd swear this writer was one of the late '60s or '70s crop. I can think of several senior authors who could benefit from whatever Pohl's literary fountain of youth might be.

The latest novel from his pen is *Starburst,* a reworking and lengthening of the novelette "The Gold at the Starbow's End"; Pohl is in top form with it.

It opens in the very near future in an America on the brink of anarchy; eight U.S. astronauts (four married couples) begin the first interstellar voyage to Alpha Centauri. But midway in the years-long voyage, they discover the trip is a fraud; the newly-discovered planet they are aiming for simply does not exist. (I *hate* revealing this kind of surprise plot twist, but there are times when it's impossible to talk about the rest of the book without doing so.)

It seems that creative scientific thinking is dead; the eight cream-of-the-crop young people have been sent out to sink or swim (most think they'll sink) but, as the German scientist who conceived the mission puts it, they'll have the unparalleled opportunity to think for ten years. Given language and number theory as trip-time "recreation," perhaps they might at least beam back something revolutionary before sinking.

It all succeeds a little too well; seven of the eight develop into superhumans, albeit wildly eccentric superhumans. They collectively manage to tran-

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scend causality, which essentially means they can do anything. This includes building a livable, workable habitat when they get to Centauri, inventing a new stardrive, having lots and lots of genetically manipulated, precocious children in a very short time, and effectively reducing Earth's culture to chaos by sending back a beam that eliminates nuclear technology. The climax comes when they mount a return expedition to Earth (piloted by a six-year-old).

Even at his most serious, there's an underlying streak of humor in Pohl's work; *Starburst* never breaks into outright satire, but it certainly comes close. The manipulative German scientist who becomes the object of single-minded revenge by the original eight recalls Dr. Strangelove; the post-nuclear U.S. they find on returning is confined to about the area of the District of Columbia, and is run by a hick president named Jimbo Tupelo whose motherly wife is his vice president. And it's hard to know how seriously to take the superhuman monsters the astronauts become, with their outrageous mixture of advanced scientific theory, metaphysics, and the *I Ching*.

Pohl makes it all jell, somehow. I nominate him for the most promising young writer of the year.

THE IDENTITY MATRIX
Jack L. Chalker
Timescape, $2.75 (paper).

The popular Jack Chalker, contrariwise to Mr. Pohl, is a relatively recently developed author (well within the past decade) whose work reminds me irresistably of the pulp era, the period in which the emphasis was on great ideas rather than writing skills.

In *The Identity Matrix*, the Earth is being invaded by aliens capable of taking over a human body with their own personalities by a mere touch. There are, in fact, two sets of bodynappers, separate races at war across many worlds. One, closer to us in psychology, considers humanity mainly as a source for bodies when needed; they are the Urulu. The other, "the Association," with somewhat greater powers, aims to make every world it comes across into a zombie Utopia.

Then there is a third force, a secret government agency set up when this hidden war is discovered. Through intensive research, it has learned to manipulate identities, though not yet to exchange them, and might be on the way to becoming a human equivalent of the Association.

All this could be the basis for a corker of an intrigue story in which the reader would never be sure who was who, a step

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beyond the bodysnatching aliens of Heinlein's classic *The Puppet Masters*. Unfortunately, this needs tight and clever plotting. Chalker gives the impression of not knowing what's going to happen until he gets there; incident follows incident, the plot proceeds in fits and starts, and if there is an overall shape to it all, I missed it.

I'd almost prefer not to go into the specifics of another aspect of the novel, but it's nearly impossible not to. The hero, an introverted, middle-aged male academic, spends most of the book trapped in a female body, due to a crossed-wire encounter with a bodynapping alien. This is certainly a legitimate speculative concept in sexual psychology, but here I *was* reminded of Heinlein—not *The Puppet Masters,* alas, but *I Will Fear No Evil,* which deals with something of the same situation and is *not* one of Heinlein's more successful works. Chalker's hero - heroine, after sexual experimentation, pregnancy, and abortion, has "his" indentity matrix wiped, assumes a new one as a high-class Vegas prostitute and stripper, gets the old identity back which then combines with the newer one, and ends up in a lesbian relationship with the woman (in another body) whose body he is in. (I hope you're following all this.)

This comes across as more kinky than kicky, sleazily exploitative rather than sexually extrapolative. Perhaps a female author should try exploring this transexual theme in depth; the males so far have muffed it.

THE BEAST
By Robert Stallman
Timescape, $2.50 (paper).

This is really the third Book of the Beast, the first two having been *The Orphan* and *The Captive.* Sadly, the author, Robert Stallman, died in 1980, but had fortunately finished the trilogy. I had heard good things about the first two sections, but had also gathered that it was something of an ongoing story, and so waited for the entire work to be completed before reading any of it. I'm glad I did so, and recommend it as a *modus operandi* for tackling it—which, come to think of it, is a dumb thing to say. Those who have already read the first two can't very well unread them. But it is certainly essential to have read the first two before starting the third.

Stallman has based the book on a unique premise. The Beast of the title is indeed a beast —claws, fangs, fur, and all—that is bear-sized and carnivorous, but with some special talents. It is of human intelligence (or more exactly, the equivalent), has some extra senses akin to

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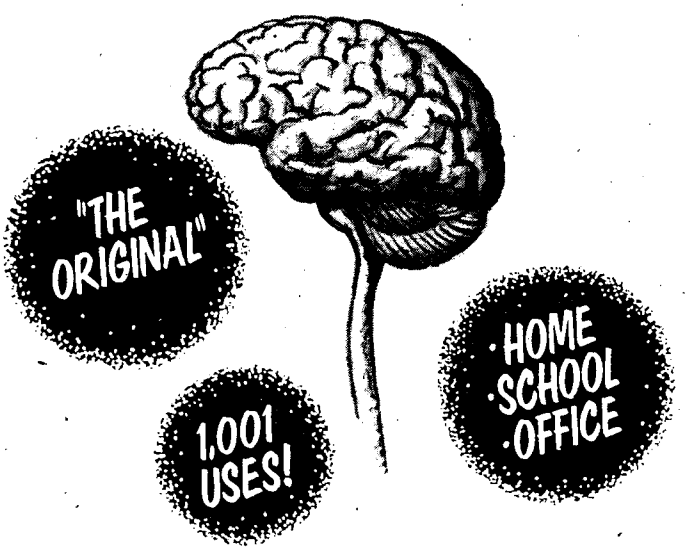

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telepathy, and, above all, is a sort of were-human, i.e. it can, at will, change to human form, complete with personality and basic knowledge such as speech.

This certainly raises some fundamental questions which are not answered in the first two books as we follow the Beast through three human avatars—boy, adolescent, and young man—in the Midwest and Southwest of the 1930s. It is to Stallman's credit that the story he tells of the Beast's human involvements is so good that the logical premises one wants settled go—at least temporarily—by the wayside.

The third novel finds Barry, the Beast's adult human persona, married and with a stepdaughter who soon figures out his dual nature (she likes the big pussycat that appears only at night). Barry's story, mostly to do with his journalistic investigation of an early peyote cult among the local Indians, alternates with that of a female Beast and *her* alter ego (alter corpus?) until their inevitable meeting and its consequences, not only for them, but their human manifestations and the people they are involved with.

Here answers are given to the questions raised throughout the trilogy; I'm not sure they are fully satisfactory, being a curious combination of science fiction and mysticism. This is certainly made up for by the originality of the idea and Stallman's fine writing—he evokes the Middle America of the Depression years superbly. Much of *The Beast* takes place in the Canyon de Chelly, one of the few magical places of this world, and he manages to capture the wonder of it.

The first two books are still available; I recommend this trilogy as an experience in fantasy reading not quite like any other.

THE BLUE SWORD
By Robin McKinley
Greenwillow Books, $9.50.

Robin McKinley made an indelible impression with her first novel, *Beauty,* a witty, sophisticated and charming retelling of "Beauty and the Beast" which transcended fable into true fantasy. Her second is equally adept in a very different key.

The Blue Sword is set in a world that is not ours, but certainly bears some strong resemblances. Harry (short for Angharad) has come to join her brother, Richard, in an outpost of a hot dusty subcontinent that their tea-drinking, rifle-bearing, technologically advanced culture has conquered. To the north of the outpost are the Hillmen, the remains of an ancient culture who stubbornly resist conquest or even contact.

The ruling family of the Hillmen is supposed to have odd

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and mysterious powers, regarded as superstition by Harry's people. When their king, Corlath, makes an unprecedented visit to the outpost to plead for help against a Northern Empire whose hordes are not human and the Emperor of which is a sorcerer-king, he is refused by the unbelieving British—er, sorry, Outlanders, they're called.

He sees Harry and is directed by his mysterious power, called *kelar,* which is more controlling-of than controlled-by those who have it, to kidnap her. Harry finds herself immediately at home with the Hillmen, becomes aware that she herself has *kelar,* and is trained as a damalur-sol, a lady hero.

All this and what follows would be errant, simplistic nonsense in less sure hands, but McKinley takes a leisurely course; everything is low-keyed, especially the fantasy elements, which are fed in very slowly, simply as aspects of the narrative and the culture, not necessarily dominant until the climax. Her strongest point, as in *Beauty,* is her characters. Harry is bright, cynical, and intelligently confused by her place between two cultures; as a lady hero, she does *not* come across as Conan in drag, as so many of the recent flood of swordswomen have. There are two wonderful nonanthropomorphic animals, a horse and a hunting cat; the supporting human cast is equally engaging.

Any book that, at one point or another, reminded me of *The Sheikh, Gunga Din, Islandia,* and *The Lord of the Rings,* can't be anything but a true original.

THE DARK TOWER: THE GUNSLINGER
By Stephen King
Donald M. Grant, Publisher; $20.

Stephen King, of course, is famous for long, dense novels of the supernatural manifesting itself in the modern world, which have scared enough people to achieve multiple bestsellerdom. *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger* is a very different aspect of his work and something of a revelation for me. Mr. King is *not* just a bestselling novelist.

This new work consists of five connected short stories (all initially appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*) that form one continuous narrative.

The opening story just might take place in the Old West, but an Old West fragmented and peculiar to the point of surrealism, as if we were being shown for what they are, the propped and painted movie-set flats that make up the one-street town. "Hey Jude" is heard on the barroom piano, but even that anachronism is the only specific reference to a world we know.

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A gunslinger pursues a man in black through the wasted town (pooorer than the dirt-poorest town on the frontier) and the desert beyond.

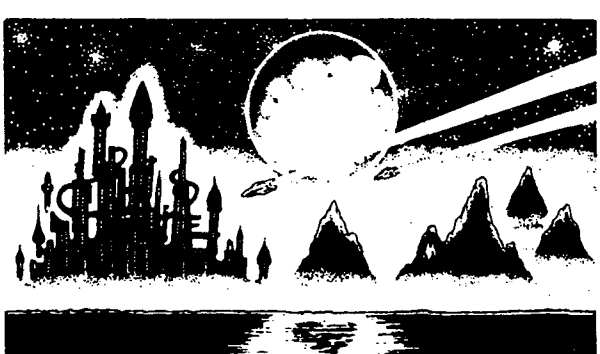
The time is the future. Our time has been forgotten save for vague remnants in the wars and disasters that obligerated it. The landscape is blasted and sparsely inhabited. What inhabitants there are, are not necessarily human; there are mutants and demons and less specific presences. The gunslinger is an aristocratic warrior, trained in a discipline akin to the samurai. The man in black is a sorcerer.

King does not go out of his way to provide information about his setting. We gradually learn much (but not all) about Roland, the gunslinger, through flashbacks, but what we learn about his world is what the author chooses to show us in Roland's odyssey. This sort of vagueness is usually more annoying than effective in fantasy, but here it is powerfully evocative.

It must be mentioned that this edition is that rarest phenomenon, a beautifully illustrated book. Michael Whelan's magic realism complements the text in five superb paintings.

In an afterword, King says that this work is only part of an enormous projected novel that he figures will take him 300 years to complete. If it's all to be as good as this, I sincerely hope he makes it.

Recent publications by those connected with this magazine include *Science Fiction A to Z, A Dictionary of the Great S.F. Themes* collected by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, & Charles G. Waugh, Houghton Mifflin, $21.95. ●



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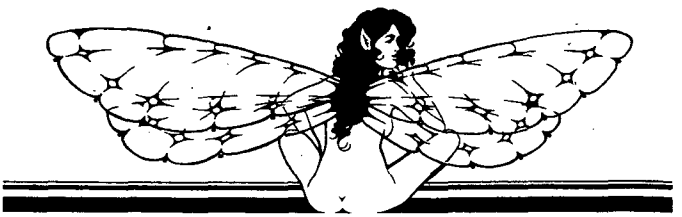
MARTIN GARDNER

PIGGY'S GLASSES AND THE MOON



As the letters departments of SF magazines testify, readers who know their science take great delight in calling attention to scientific blunders in stories by authors who should know better. I had the pleasure last May of attending Skycon 2, in Asheville, North Carolina, and hearing Hal Clement speak about such things. Mr. Clement mentioned two glaring goofs that he had come upon in William Golding's classic of anthropological SF, *Lord of the Flies*. I am ashamed to admit that when I first read this somber novel, back in the fifties, I hadn't noticed either of them.

If you enjoyed *Lord of the Flies*, or saw the British movie version, you will recall Piggy, the rotund intellectual among the stranded schoolboys. He was so myopic that without his thick glasses he could hardly see his own hands, and the world beyond his hands seemed covered by what Golding calls a "luminous veil." Chapter 2 describes how the boys used Piggy's glasses to start a much-needed fire:

> "There was pushing and pulling and officious cries. Ralph moved the lenses back and forth, this way and that, till a glossy white image of the declining sun lay on a piece of rotten wood. Almost at once a thin trickle of smoke rose up and made him cough. Jack knelt too and blew gently, so that the smoke drifted away, thickening, and a tiny flame appeared. The flame, nearly invisible at first in that bright sunlight, enveloped a small twig, grew, was enriched with color and reached up to a branch which exploded with a sharp crack. The flame flapped higher and the boys broke into a cheer."

What whopping blunder in high school physics did Golding make when he wrote that paragraph? The answer is on page 71.

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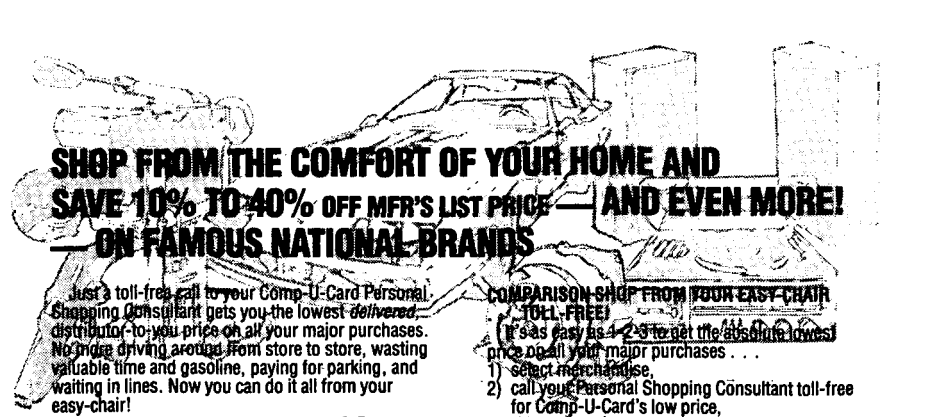

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MEN OF LETTERS

ACROSS

1 Goofy, for one
4 Friend: Fr.
8 Computer morsel
12 Creator of Vermilion Sands
14 Apt. overseers
15 Creator of "Blackie" DuQuesne
16 Famous movie river?
17 Corroded
18 Ancient land near the Dead Sea
19 Digit
20 Phnom _____
22 Snick-and-_____ (machete)
24 French city
27 Spot
29 Without butter
30 Dark
31 Songwriter Frank
34 Base with "fit" or "diction"
35 Swallow
38 Completely prepared
40 Televised
41 Master of mime
45 Earth color
47 Yonder lady
48 Other: Sp.
51 "Show some feeling!"
52 "_____ sow, so..."
54 Cuts
56 Lady of the house
57 _____ bien (all right): Sp.
59 QT
60 _____ breve
62 He wrote "Father Giles of Ham"
65 Little match girl, for one
66 "Weapon Shops of Isher" author
67 Pocket fuzz
68 Coward of note
69 King Kong's abductee

DOWN

1 Nash and namesakes
2 Bloodletters?
3 Countenance
4 What cyanide smells like
5 Injurers
6 N.Y. subway
7 Old English letter
8 Author of "The Marching Morons"
9 Bert Smallways' creator
10 Author Levin
11 Powers featured in Alfred Bester's "The Stars My Destination"
12 Pier: Fr.
13 Notorious hallucinogens
15 Creator of M. Valdemar: inits.
19 Greek letter
21 Cthulhu's creator
23 "The Crawling _____," 1958 movie
25 One: Ger.
26 Leave as is, in printing
28 Only preventer of forest fires
32 Animal or fur: abbr.
33 "Norma _____"
35 Heinlein's "The _____ Into Summer"
36 Noun ending
37 Creator of "Alley Oop," in the comics
39 Finney's "The Circus of Dr. _____"

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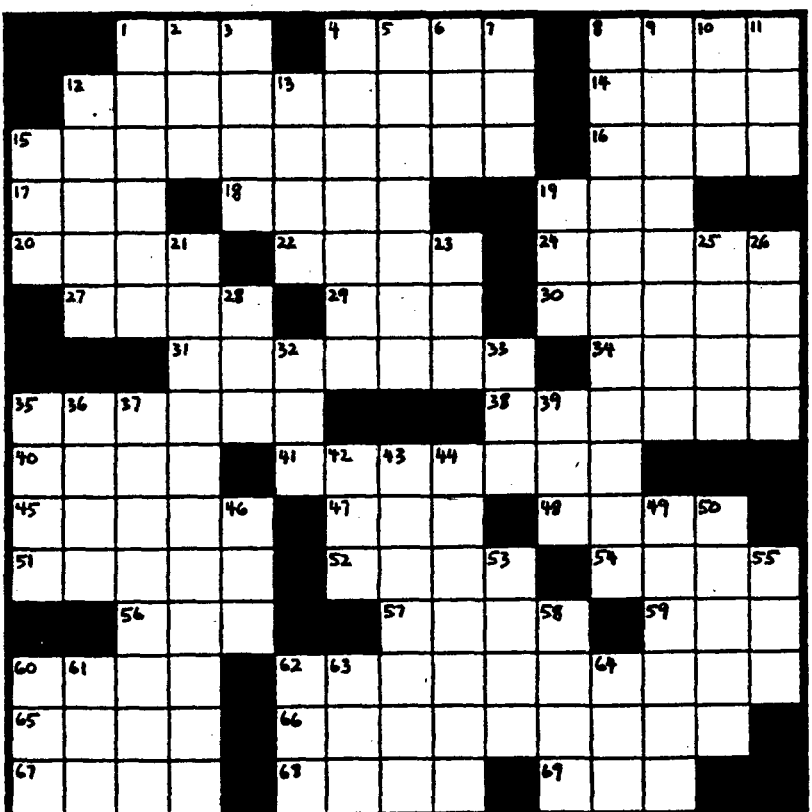
Solution on page 86

42 Eureka!
43 Emergency manpower
44 "The _____ World," by 12 Across
46 Most fwy. turns
49 Quit
50 Little hooter
53 English school
55 Antonym's antonym: abbr.
58 Edison's middle name
60 Piercing tool
61 My _____, Vietnam
62 Singer Peerce
63 Old car
64 Heyerdahl's" _____-Tiki"



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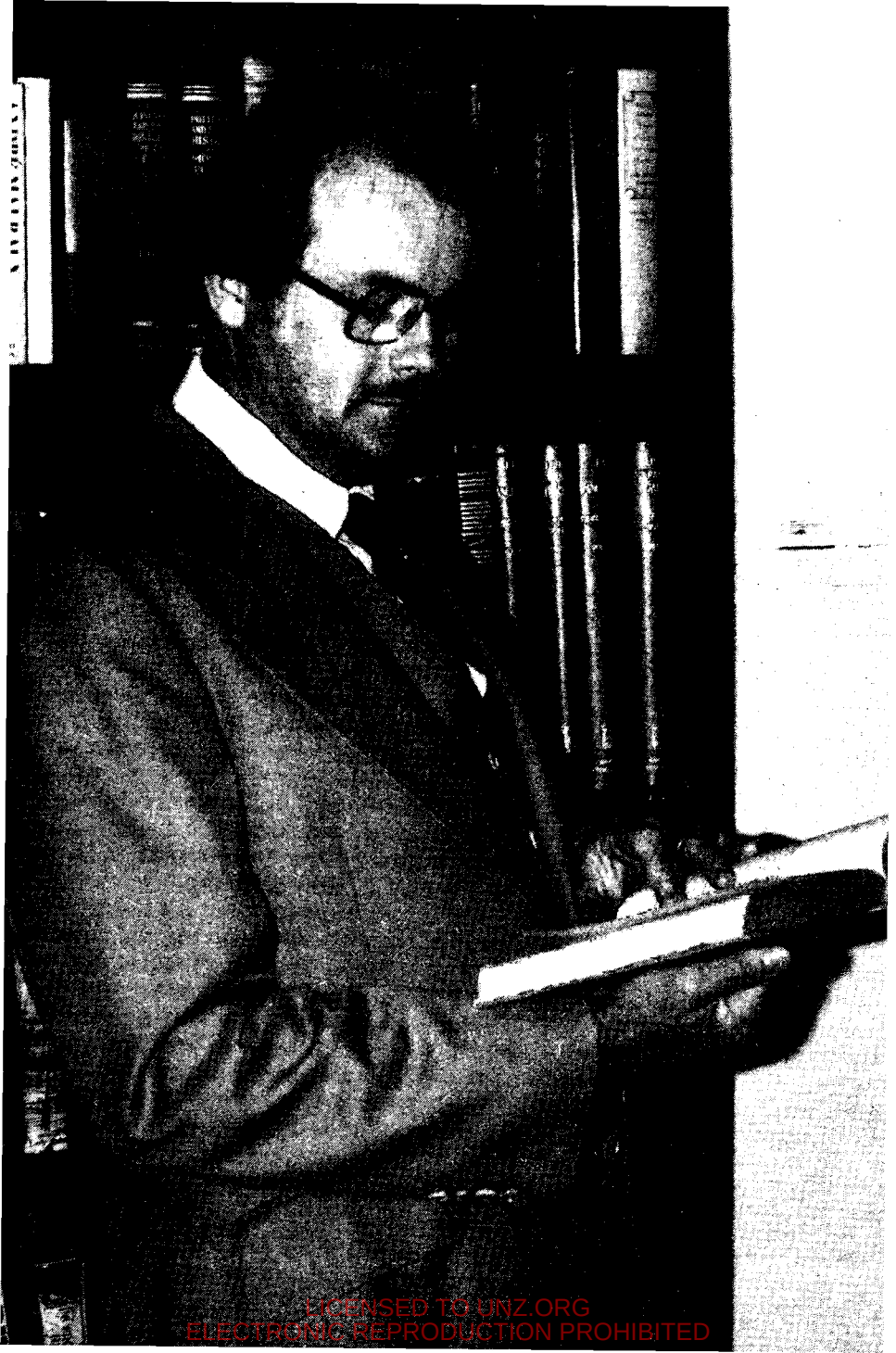

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The politics behind the prose

PROFILE

JERRY POURNELLE

by Charles Platt

"We can piously hope that there will be no armies in the future. It is an unlikely hope; at least history is against it. On the evidence, peace is a purely theoretical state of affairs whose existence we deduce because there have been intervals between wars."*

*From Jerry Pournelle's introduction to *Hammer's Slammers* by David Drake.

To some readers, this excerpt from one of Jerry Pournelle's many musings on the subject of armed conflict will epitomize all that there is to distrust in military thinking. Such readers will suspect the author of paying mere lip-service to peace, since from their perspective anyone who writes about the "inevitability" of war is in effect helping to promote it.

Jerry Pournelle has written

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PROFILE

"Representative democracy is not the be-all and end-all. I don't give a damn if the political system is monarchical or elective, so long as it leaves me alone. And my suspicion is, by the way, that a king has less power over me than a president."

immensely successful novels with Larry Niven *Lucifer's Hammer, The Mote in God's Eye, Oath of Fealty);* he has also written persuasively about the promise of space *(A Step Father Out);* and his solo-written science fiction includes adventure novels such as *The Mercenary* and *Janissaries.* His work is diverse, but its message remains basically the same, and is at times expressed so forcibly that one cannot consider his writing without discussing its politics.

His solo-written work frequently features mercenaries of the future, portrayed as basically honorable men who clean up social chaos. When freedom is threatened, the culprits are generally venal, incompetent politicians or complacent citizens who lack the courage to acknowledge that peace does not come free, or even cheap—it must be won and protected by soldiers who deserve our respect as well as our suspicion.

To readers who like to imagine that scientific

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advances will be accompanied by social progress, Pournelle's world-view is a depressing one. Not only does he imply that warfare will be just as inevitable in the future as it has been in the past; worse still, he seems almost to enjoy writing about it.

Jerry Pournelle lives in a large old wooden house in a quiet white-collar residential neighborhood just north of Los Angeles. Also present in his home, at various times of the day, are his wife and three children, his research assistant, and a menacing dog who sniffs me suspiciously before I'm allowed through the front door. "Don't worry. He only bites pacifists," I'm told.

The office/study, where the work is done, turns out to be an unpretentiously makeshift mixture of old and new, function and ornament. A modern swivel chair stands in front of a grand old desk that dominates the center of the room. The desk is piled untidily with papers; the walls are hidden behind tall shelves crammed with books and more papers; a computer video monitor stands to one side, with portable keyboard; the shades are pulled halfway down over the windows and outside them the lush Californian foliage is dappled with sunlight.

Pournelle himself is tall and broad-shouldered. His stature, coupled with a powerful, commanding voice, can make him seem bombastic or even intimidating. However, as he welcomes me into his home, he seems relaxed, generous, and hospitable, ready and willing to converse informally over a series of glasses of sherry. What begins as an interview becomes a conversation that continues for three full hours.

I begin by suggesting that his books encourage young readers to identify strongly with heroes who solve complex social problems by using brute force. Does he ever worry about encouraging kids to indulge in power fantasies?

"If you are trying to tell me that I should not depict

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realistically the attractions of a properly run military outfit," he replies ,"you're a fool. Because it can be damned attractive. Do you think I should exercise self-censorship and not let people know? In the movie version of *Faustus,* Richard Burton is on horseback in armor and he says, 'Is it not a pleasant thing to be a king and ride in triumph to Samarkand?' Should that line have been suppressed? Are you telling me that I shouldn't tell people that there *is* a share of glory? It's a damned attractive life. If it wasn't, why would so many people want it?"

I reply that it is the presentation of violence as an easy answer that bothers me most. In *The Mercenary,* for instance, the hero tackles a planet's problems by luring its socially undesirable, recalcitrant members of society into a giant stadium, where they are massacred.

Pournelle, however, does not see this as advocating violence as a permanent solution. "In the stadium scene, the politician turns to the soldier and says, 'You saved our world.' But the soldier says, 'God damn you, don't say things like that, I've bought you a little time, that's all I could do, and it's up to you to do the rest, and God help you if you don't.' Now I don't think that that is saying he has solved their problems or anything like it. The politician may think his problems have been solved because his opposition has been temporarily eliminated. The soldier knows better.

"I think I have a realistic view of human nature. Isaac Asimov has an asinine motto: 'Violence is the last refuge of the incompetent.' I agree with it completely—if it's read properly: Only the incompetent wait until it's the last resort! If you don't believe that violence can be an effective means of changing destiny, then I invite you to ask the Carthaginians their opinion. Or the Knights Templar; they were among the most successful international corporations in the history of mankind and were suppressed with bloody

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awful violence and horror. I guess what I have to tell you is that there is a terrible truth to Goering's remark that the noblest of spirits, the highest of aspirations, may be silenced if their bearer is beaten to death with a rubber truncheon. One doesn't have to like that to admit it's got a lot of truth to it."

But isn't there a danger that armed preparedness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? Isn't the very existence of weapons an encouragement to use them?

He answers this with a dramatic demonstration. "You sit here in an area that has the lowest crime rate in Los Angeles," he tells me. "There may be a reason for this." He reaches under his desk, pulls out an enormous stainless steel revolver, and brandishes it meaningly, although his finger is not on the trigger and the gun is pointed only at the ceiling, not at me or anyone else in the room.

"Probably everybody on this block can do what I just did," he continues, replacing the gun in its hiding place and relaxing back in his chair. "And yet there hasn't been a gunshot fired on this block since I've been here, and that's fifteen years. I teach my children, as soon as they're old enough, what weapons are—they all know where they are in this house, and they never touch them. There are three rules: All guns are always loaded. You must never put your finger on the trigger unless you're prepared to fire it. You never point a gun at anything you don't intend to kill. Now, given these rules, how could anyone get hurt if you obey them? The people that terrify me are the *amateurs*. My kids will never shoot anyone accidentally. I don't say, however, that they will never shoot anyone.

"I have looked through history, and I've found only two periods of sustained peace, spanning generations, in the history of mankind. Do you find more? One was the Pax Romana, which was enforced essentially by the unilaterial supremacy of Rome. The other was the Pax

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Britannica, which was enforced essentially by the unilateral supremacy of the British fleet and marines.

"Even a country like Switzerland has not had long periods of peace. Switzerland has a fairly decent record, but look at the cost—'cost' in your terms, not mine. They have universal military training, brutally enforced. Do you know the penalty for refusing military service in Switzerland? The alternative is ten years in prison, or permanent exile. You don't have to guess that every Swiss household has weapons; you *know* they do. And they include not merely sporting rifles and pistols but automatic weapons, mortars, and military equipment. And yet the Swiss crime rate is lower than ours; their violent crime rate is almost nonexistent. So I put it to you that here is a society that is not thought of as oppressive or overly violent—it is said to be dull. But it is more thoroughly armed than you can conceive of.

"My view of gun control is that we ought to implement the Swiss system in the United States. Every citizen of this country should go through at least weapons familiarity and some kind of basic training and be required to keep weapons. I don't think that anyone will invade us after that, and we might be able to do away with some of our strategic weapons, although not all of them.

"I think the harnessing of violence, and the understanding of the price you pay if you are unwilling to participate in your own defense, is all wrapped up with my view of gun control: I prefer to reduce the agentry of the State. You know, during most of the period of the Roman republic, it had only twenty-four paid policemen: the bodyguards of the consuls. For the rest, court decisions were almost self-enforcing. Citizens were expected to aid the magistrate.

"It is very hard for the State to be oppressive when it must get such active participation of the citizenry to enforce its decisions. I

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think that would be much preferable to agentry—to hiring people to enforce decrees for you. Have you ever been to a cop house and talked to them, and listened to what they think of civilians?"

This sounds like a fundamentally democratic kind of system—all citizens equally armed—and yet, in his fiction, Jerry Pournelle tends to portray a small group imposing its will on the masses, for their own good. And in *The Mote in God's Eye* a cyclical view of history is used to justify an eventual return to an aristocratic monarchy—which the book seems to suggest is not entirely a bad idea.

"Representative democracy is not the be-all and end-all," he replies. "In fact I don't give a damn if the political system is monarchical or elective, so long as it has large areas in which it leaves me alone. And my suspicion is, by the way, that a king has less power over me than a president. Read your Rousseau on the subject: his theory of the general will. The general will is the will of all, and thus if you oppose what the government says, you are really opposing your own will, and therefore *you may be forced to be free,* hm? That strikes me as being the ultimate rationale for something even worse than fascism, because fascism at least understood that there are differences between people and said, basically, You are going to compromise your differences and work together. I'm talking about Italian fascism, not German national socialism, which is an entirely different matter and was not based on any rational view of *anything.*

"The communist system is based on Rousseau's idea of the general will. The Marxists say that we'll just eliminate all the classes but one. So I still think that fascists are considerably less enemies to traditional western civilization than communists, so long as we clearly distinguish between German national socialism and Ibero-Italian fascism. Mussolini not

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only made the railroads run on time; he *built* them. Whatever you want to say, Italy would probably be better off under him than it is under whatever the hell it has now.

"I don't know, I'm not an Italian, and in many respects I have no right to an opinion on the subject; but I just look at their economic development pattern in the 1920s, starting with a much lower base than they have now. And I find that the Italian anti-fascist writers do not have the verve of the German anti-Nazi writers; they find it harder to find something to hate. I mean, the guy who makes you drink castor oil is certainly not being very nice to you, but that's entirely different from his putting you in a goddam camp or making a lamp shade out of you.

"I think it is very possible that Mussolini could have made a different decision and become an ally of the West. He almost was; he kept Austria from being absorbed by Germany for many years, and could to this day be a hero. After all, Stalin is still thought of in some heroic terms, and yet that son of a bitch managed to knock off more people than Hitler ever did, and I'm not talking about during the Second World War. I mean in the phony famine in the Ukraine, and all the rest of it. He racked up a score that Ghengis Khan would envy."

I break in to object that there can't be many people who admire Stalin any more.

"What about most professors of philosophy over age fifty?" he responds. "After all, don't we still think of Marcuse as a legitimate philosopher? And yet what is he but a Stalinist apologist? He takes Erich Fromm's theory of alienation and uses it to become an apologist for the worst excesses of the Stalinist regime. Do you find that rational? Do you find his book *readable,* for that matter? Yet he was a tenured professor at a California university supported by the taxpayers.

"You know, I don't find this country in terrible danger of losing all its freedoms when it

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will pay a man as *dull* as Marcuse to be a professor at one of its leading universities." He smiles wickedly.

Still on politics—since so much of his writing is political, and since Jerry Pournelle himself obviously loves a political debate—I can't resist mentioning that I heard he was, at one time, a member of the Communist Party.

He pauses and looks not so much embarrassed as rueful and abashed. "That was a long time ago, after I got out of the Korean war and came back and was an undergraduate. I fell into the hands of those who kept telling us that Marxism was within the Western tradition, and so forth. I was also victim of the snigger-theory of philosophy, which is that if you admire anyone other than a leftist, then you're barely tolerated in the University department, and they laugh at you. I had been through a pretty miserable war; the communists promised to do something, and it didn't look

> "To march in step with the flywheel of history is about the only inducement that Marx gives you for being loyal to his cause: 'What is going to be is inevitable, and therefore you ought to be for it, because that's what's good.' That seems to me nothing but the contemptible worship of power. And yet the modern American intellectual finds communism more acceptable than fascism."

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to me as if anyone else was going to do anything." He shrugs. "Misplaced idealism.

"Being a communist was a matter of selective blindness. You adopt a system of looking at things, and if you interpret what you see in those terms, and in no other way, it's easy to delude yourself. You cut yourself off from almost everyone else; your only close friends are people who are part of that movement. If you try to quit, they throw you out in such a way that people who used to be your best friends will cross the street to avoid you.

"I've studied formal philosophy, and quite a lot of it. I wasn't converted to the materialist view of things for some time; I found it unsatisfactory. On the other hand, communism didn't give me an incentive for doing *anything*. To march in step with the flywheel of history is about the only inducement that Marx gives you for being loyal to his cause. 'What is going to be, is inevitable; and therefore you ought to be for it, because that's what's good.' That seems to me nothing but the rather contemptible worship of power. And yet the modern American intellectual finds communism more acceptable than fascism."

Unlike many science-fiction writers who dabble in future social history and interstellar empires, Jerry Pournelle has some first-hand experience of that on which he speculates. Prior to becoming a full-time freelance writer in the early 1970s, he worked for local city government: "I was director of research for the City of Los Angeles, which was a political plum in some respects. I wrote the Mayor's speeches for him; that was the one thing I really *had* to do."

And before that, he spent many years in the aerospace industry: "I had a very senior position for someone my age, in North American Aviation, which at that time was the outfit that was building Apollo. I was a Space Scientist; my position was to find things within the company that I thought I could contribute to, and go work on them. The last

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professional assignment I had was to work on the experimental design for Apollo 21. But there wasn't going to be any Apollo 21, it became fairly obvious, and at the same time the management said, 'We've got to trim the number of people who are senior scientists.' They offered me a position with a raise in salary as a manager in the operations research department, which is what I'm supposed to know most about, in scientific disciplines. But I would have been supervising two-hundred-and-something employees, which would have been a disaster. I have never been a supervisor of any large group."

And so, after moving into the political work and various other activities, he chose to become a writer: a job in which he manages—and answers to—no one but himself.

Pournelle remains active in real-world politics, however, particularly where the space program is involved. "Very early on, when I was managing the human factors laboratories at Boeing, it had become obvious to me that the space program wasn't really going anywhere. Kennedy's announcement just committed us to a specific goal; it was not a program of designing fundamental building blocks to exploit the space medium. We have yet to do that.

"There were, and are, no *technical* problems in doing what seemed then, and seems now, so very obvious that we ought to be doing. The problems were all political. So, already possessing a doctorate in psychology, I went out and got another one in political science, to study politics and learn how to manipulate those levers.

"This, I suppose, is one reason why I'm now a writer; I can reach considerably more people. I'm not conceited enough to think that I was that good in the systems analysis business; I have no great illusions that my value to the space program in a professional capacity would be that much greater now than, perhaps, my son, who has

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recently been to the universities. So I prefer to get my message across by having a lot of readers."

At the same time, he is secretary of the L5 Society—a privately funded group advocating space colonies along the lines suggested by Gerard O'Neill—and he is co-founder of The Citizens' Advisory Council on National Space Policy. This latter group has hosted meetings of notables including aerospace engineers, company presidents, the Administrator of NASA, and the Presidential Science Adviser, and has submitted its recommendations to the government.

But his main interest—and a formidable source of income—is still his writing. And almost all of his books, written solo or in collaboration, convey deliberate messages.

"The best way I know to be persuasive is to be read by a very large number of people. They pay you lots of money for being read by a large number of people. I call it doing well by doing good. I certainly do well; it's up to you as to whether I do good. I think I'm being fairly effective.

"*Lucifer's Hammer,* for example, put across a stronger pro-technology message than you might think. It said that civilization is fragile, and it's worth keeping, which is a relevant message in these times, when a large number of people seem to think that the benefits of civilization come free-flowing from heaven with no work on anyone's part. People have about as much understanding of where these benefits come from as my dog has of where the canned dog food comes from. I think that's tragic.

"The book put forth a legitimate message, and it did it without any of its characters, save one, knowing what the message was. I think that's the right way to write ideological fiction, if you want to call it that. I don't think the characters ought to know what the message is. That's my quarrel with Ayn Rand, other than that I don't agree

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with her message anyway."

Since his collaborations with Larry Niven have been so successful, earning giant royalty advances, I ask Jerry Pournelle if he doesn't worry that the "blockbuster" system in publishing draws resources away from other, less commercial books by new authors—who may find it increasingly difficult to get published.

"I completely agree," he says. "But what am I to do?"

Does it bother him when the money that his books earn, or the books themselves, attract criticism?

"I can get in the mail twelve favorable reviews in major publications, and one bad review in an amateur magazine that is circulated to twenty-six people, nine of whom don't read it. . . and I will brood over that bad review all day." He smiles and shrugs. I get the impression that, though he is sensitive to criticism, it will take more than bad reviews to deflect him from his sense of purpose.

I ask if, as a writer of scientifically accurate, predictive fiction, he disapproves of the trend toward fantasy.

"I know very little about fantasy. If I ever wrote it, I would have to come up with a very self-consistent mythology in which to place the story. I would be cheating my readers if I did not give them what they expect: a fairly ruthless internal consistency.

"I'll tell you that, of twentieth-century authors, I probably admire C. S. Lewis more than any other, and I suppose in a sense *The Great Divorce* is one of my favorite works—which we stole from outrageously for *Inferno,* by the way. Lewis did it better than we did, I'll be the first to admit, although we made it maybe a little more exciting. So I like good fantasy, but I have not been willing to work hard enough to come up with an epic book. I guess I would have to do an epic-proportioned fantasy; I don't know how to do little tales.

"Some fantasy is unutterably trivial. You know, you may criticize *The Mercenary,* but what about

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John Norman?" (Author of numerous semi-erotic fantasy novels featuring male barbarian warriors with female slaves.) "I think my wife would not even be civil to Mr. Norman if she were to meet him at a cocktail party. I've been married to the most liberated woman you've ever met, for twenty-something years. She is in the top one percent of salaried women in the country, she is an expert at what she does, she may be the world's best at what she does. She teaches reading to jailed teenagers. Her students are all illiterate, over thirteen years old. She has not yet failed to teach one to read, though she gets them with documentation and tests from psychologists proving it's impossible.

"I have a different view of women from that in the John Norman novels, which I find fairly boring. Norman, like Marcuse, is both ethically horrifying and dull. In the first place, to be quite blunt about it, the idea of sex with a woman confined in a rape-rack does not appeal to me enormously. I guess that was almost the first thing that struck me in reading those books, how little fun that would be." He hesitates for a moment. "I'm not sure I want that quoted . . . but maybe I do."

Leaving aside fantasy, what of science fiction? Does he feel that, despite the vast increase in the quantity of books, innovation in the field is declining?

"In some respects science fiction is becoming bankrupt; we're not studying much science, and most writers are way out of date on what's going on.

"But isn't part of the problem also that at least a portion of the field takes it literally that works have to be depressing in order to be good? As in Vonnegut's view of life, which is that inevitably you get stepped on? I don't find that to be historically true, and I don't find it to be true of my own life.

"I admire Brian Aldiss greatly, but I have never heard a more outrageous

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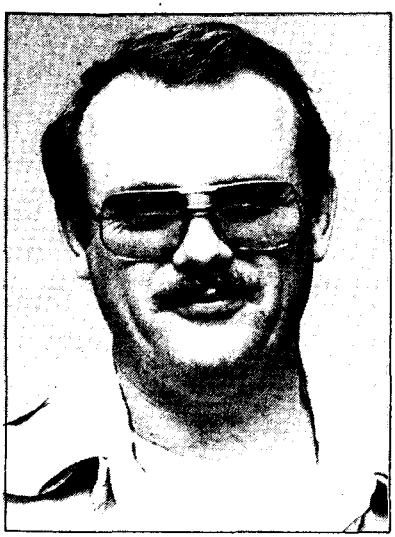
PROFILE



"**Brian** Aldiss said that Barry Malzber's *Beyond Apollo* recognizes the fallen state of man and the tragic view of life that is essential to all literature. I simply cannot buy that. I cannot agree that literature must be tragic or that man's fallen state has to be the central thesis."

statement than his defense of giving the first Campbell Award—the one then given by Harry Harrison and his groupies—to Barry Malzberg for *Beyond Apollo,* which is probably the one novel you could be absolutely certain that John W. Campbell would never have bought or even have read more than ten pages of. Aldiss said that the book recognizes the fallen state of man and the tragic view of life that are essential to all literature. I simply cannot buy that; I cannot agree that literature must be tragic or that man's fallen state has to be the central thesis. It's the central thesis of Christianity, but the Christian sects that I find most admirable dwell upon that less than they do upon the idea of *redemption.*

"I prefer to think that mankind has a 100-billion-year future, and to try to write in such a way as to help bring that about. Can you believe that we are no more than a million years old—if that—and we have ahead of us 100 billion years? Hell,

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ours may be the last generation not to be immortal! So how can you be depressed? We have this whole universe, with trillions of stars in it, to conquer. It's all ours, as far as we can tell.

"I am absolutely certain that if you'd let me invest in the kind of future that I want to bring about, that I can give you whatever you want, even a little enclave in which you make your living literally by the sweat of your brow, and putter in your garden and have your own vine and your own fig tree—the biblical recipe for happiness. I guess what I am trying to say is, What *do* you want?

"Suppose that life is meaningless in that we really are merely the dance of the atoms—which I find an enormously improbable thing to believe; you can't calculate the odds against it. But even if this is so, don't you find it exciting that there are 100 billion years ahead of us, and we've just started? Who knows what we can build? Maybe what we're doing is creating God."

I comment that, to the writer or the reader weighed down with more everyday cares and concerns, taking the long view is not always easy.

"But how can you have anything *but* a long view? Perhaps you can't understand what it was like to grow up in a town in which the ice man really came around in a horse and buggy. I literally went from riding horses and jumping over fences, supervising tenant farmers in cotton fields, who were only a degree removed from slavery . . . to seeing people land on the Moon. Now, that's a transition. We live in a marvelous time, and it's getting better. So people have to invent reasons for being unhappy. Well, if you're trying to tell me that you see no purpose to life, then I can only tell you that you haven't looked very hard."

I notice that he has been referring increasingly to theological concepts, and this prompts me to suggest that the strength with which he holds and defends his views reflects a quality that some

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find in short supply these days: faith.

"I've read the book of common prayer and was brought up around it. I attend church—Church of England. Our boys go to church schools, if that means anything. And they're respectful, they're polite, they do not seem to be particularly unhappy or rebellious, and they don't sit around and brood and stare at their navels. My daughter is an officer in the paratroops and was, by the way, the first in her class, which ain't too bad." With quite pride he points to a picture of his daughter in her uniform.

"People tell me ways I ought to live," he goes on, referring perhaps to criticism he has received because of his political views or his apparent intractability. "But I look at them, and they don't seem to be as content as I am—or to have as many reasons to be content as I do."

This may sound complacent, but I think it reflects a sincere belief in his values—and a real concern for the future. Regardless of whether one shares his politics, the sincerity of Jerry Pournelle's intentions cannot be questioned. He truly believes in the necessity of defending our fragile freedoms from a position of strength, and in the importance of fulfilling our human potential by expanding out into space and reaping its rewards. Few science-fiction writers care so much about their subject matter, or put their beliefs so effectively into practice in the real world. ●

Charles Platt, formerly editor of *New Worlds*, an influential English SF magazine of the late '60s and early '70s, now resides in New York City. He is the author of *Dream Makers* (Berkley, 1980), a volume of profiles of writers of imaginative fiction. The preceding profile will appear in *Dream Makers II*, to be published by Berkley in the spring of 1983.

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THE PROTECTOR

by Art Vesity

This is Art Vesity's second appearance in *IAsfm*. His first, "The First Day," was in our September 1982 issue. We hope to be seeing more from him shortly.

art: Brad Hamann

Tanner is no fool. He knows that sometimes you just get a feeling; and then find a clue to back up that feeling, and then another and another, and before you know it, your feeling's been confirmed.

And then you act—unless you're a fool.

He stands at the high marble-top desk in the First National

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Bank, pretending to fill out a deposit slip. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches the two people conferring—no, *conspiring*—near the elevator. The woman is petite and has tangled blonde hair of short length. She wears tight, faded jeans, and next to her is a stroller containing one sleeping baby. The man is of medium height and build and wears a gray pin-stripe suit that fits perfectly. With that suit and his expensively styled white hair, he looks like a broker from Wall Street. But the woman—well, Tanner has done business with ones like her on many a cold and lonely night. Hardly beautiful, but willing. And reasonable.

Tanner waits. In a moment, the mismatched man and woman head for the tellers' windows. Tanner follows, with carefully concealed eagerness. There is nothing he loves more than the hunt, the gathering of clues.

Except the kill.

There are five windows, but as usual, only two are operative. Both lines are of equal length; each has six people who shift, sigh, and check watches impatiently. Tanner waits for the odd couple to pick a line, then joins the other. You're lucky, he thinks to the people in the odd couple's line. You'll be out of here in no time.

As Tanner expected, their line begins to shrink. For no apparent reason, the teller, a pretty young woman with soft blue eyes, begins to work faster. First, the young man with whom she had been flirting is dispatched. Then, a broad-shouldered black man in a bus driver's uniform. And next will be the middle-aged woman in white. Hairdresser? Nurse? A spy in league with the odd couple? Tanner cannot see her eyes, or the eyes of the others, but he doubts they are spies—there are rarely more than two in any one vicinity. But the line *is* moving faster than his now, and the people ahead of Tanner grow even edgier and eye the other line with envy. But Tanner knows they will not change lines, because everyone knows that to move into the faster line is to make it immediately *slow down*.

Satisfied, he leaves the line and the bank, stepping out into the late-winter chill. As he pauses to light a cigarette, the woman in white emerges, looking irritated. He plays a hunch. "Ain't it somethin' how the other line always moves faster?" he says.

She looks at him with puzzled, doubtful eyes, tired eyes that have seen much suffering, and thus learned not to see it. Definitely a nurse. "You're right," she says suddenly. "Every time. Everywhere you go." She pulls the collar of her coat tighter around her neck and moves on.

Tanner grins. She is no spy. And like the others he has ques-

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tioned today, at the supermarket, the drugstore, and finally here, the odd couple's most recent stop, she had not noticed that *this* time her line moved faster than the other. Something, someone has affected their minds. The odd couple, no doubt. The man and the woman.

The alien spies.

Suddenly they emerge from the bank, not noticing Tanner, and go in separate directions without saying goodbye. Unknown to the woman, a slip of paper falls from its precarious perch at the mouth of her jacket pocket. Then, to further confirm that the fates are with him (and thus, with Earth), the wind picks up the paper and blows it to within inches of Tanner's feet. He picks it up with a steady hand and reads it. A deposit slip, with account number, name, and *address*.

Tanner smiles. This time, it will be easy.

In his small furnished room, Tanner finishes cleaning the .32-caliber pistol and lights a cigarette. It has been weeks since a kill, and he is eager to resume his role as Protector.

He sits back in the armchair, eyes lighting on a stack of UFO magazines on the nightstand. Poor, blind fools, he thinks. The evidence is there, in the press, in the skies, and still they cannot see! He wonders if there are *any* others who have the Inner Voice to guide their eyes, others who share his vital mission of stalking and eliminating the alien infiltrators. He has often thought that there must be, for though he can recognize aliens of both sexes, the Voice tells him to kill only the females. So, he has often reasoned, there must be another agent of the Voice who kills only males. A woman, perhaps. He wishes he could meet her, know her. He thinks that perhaps they will work together someday, be lovers between missions . . . He wonders if even now his female counterpart is preparing to kill the man in gray. But this is merely speculation. The Voice tells Tanner to concentrate on his own mission, and trust that the rest will be taken care of.

"Eunice Allen." He says the name of his alien target aloud, pictures her face. He wonders why the mental powers that allow her and the others to control people do not shield them from Earth's Protector, Arlen Tanner. If the aliens are able to affect human minds enough to speed up lines (and God knows what else in their daily goings-about), and to make others oblivious to the changes, then why can they not make Tanner cease and desist when he confronts them with his .32? Why do they merely cringe,

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weep, and beg for mercy? Why have several gone so far as to admit their alien identities in an attempt to dissuade him?

He thinks of the last one, the redhead he picked up in a seedy bar last month. He recalls how she tried to convince him that though she was an alien, she meant no harm to Earth, that she and her people were here to help mankind, to solve the energy crisis and bring a cancer cure. And how convincing she was! Tanner had nearly been swayed, but the Voice interceded to give him the strength to see through the ruse and pull the trigger. Yes, he decides, it must be the Voice that makes me immune to their mental powers. Is it a gift from God, or from some *other*, benign aliens who wish to assist mankind? Or is it merely evidence of my superiority as a human being?

Again, you are speculating needlessly, says the Voice. *All will be revealed in time. Concentrate on the mission.*

Tanner smiles, and gladly gives in to the wishes of the Voice. It has guided him ever since he quit college two years ago to become a Protector, and after twenty-seven successful missions, he trusts it implicitly. It has never failed him.

Eunice Allen is much more appealing in the shiny black dress (which shines even in the barroom's dull light) than she was in the faded jeans. Her eyes have a playful gleam that Tanner does not find unattractive; he almost wishes the element of alienness were not there as well.

The strip-joint is on the same block as her apartment. Tanner has bought her two drinks (but only one for himself—this is a serious business), and a price has been mentioned (reasonable). He assumes that soon they will go back to her apartment to consummate the deal. He had sought her there first, got no answer at the door, and resigned himself to prowling the neighborhood hangouts. And in this, the third one, he has found her. How clever of the aliens, he thinks, to have so many of their women pose as prostitutes in rundown sections of the city! Who but a possessor of the Inner Voice would think to look here?

For some reason, Eunice Allen does not seem to be in any hurry to get on with her work, although she seems to like Tanner well enough. He is young (twenty-three), well built (his work unloading cargo at the docks has seen to this), and at least handsome enough so that prostitutes, human and alien alike, do not sigh in resignation. (Nor do other women, for that matter, but Tanner has avoided them ever since beginning his role as Protector; he cannot risk falling in love while there is so much work to do.)

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Eunice seems preoccupied with talking about her baby boy, who is with a sitter tonight, because she suspects the child is not well. Eventually, Tanner takes advantage of a pause in her monologue to suggest they "get along," and she flashes a comely smile that says she is flattered by his eagerness.

As they make the short walk to her place, she continues talking about the child, and of how his father ran out on her when she was eight months pregnant. It is a touching though familiar tale, told sincerely, and Tanner marvels at what excellent actresses the aliens are. Suddenly, as she talks, he is struck with the distasteful idea that he may have to stalk and kill the child as well, for if this is indeed its biological mother, then it must be either alien or half-alien. But the Inner Voice has never instructed him to kill the children of his victims before; it has assured him that they are merely robot props, used by each alien to strengthen her cover. He hopes that will hold true in this case as well.

Her apartment is small and depressing, like his own. It is fairly clean, as such places go, but it contains the usual odd mixture of cheap furniture. Eunice takes off her coat and drapes it over a chair, then gestures toward an open doorway that Tanner assumes leads to the bedroom. Again she flashes her comely smile, and again he wishes that this could be just another night out. But it is not, and he draws the .32 with its silencer in place. "The game is over," he says.

Her eyes widen in surprise, and the playfulness disappears. "Oh," she says, with forced casualness. "So you like it *that* way. Look, I'm not really into that—not with guns, anyway. I've got other things we can use, but the gun has got to go, okay?"

Tanner shakes his head. "Let's drop the pretense. You can't fool me, and you can't reach me with your mental powers. I am a Protector. I know who you really are, and I know that you are here to infiltrate and take over the Earth. But mankind will prevail, because you can't fool the Inner Voice." He raises the pistol.

She holds up her hands, all pretense of casualness gone. "You can't get away with shooting me! I'll scream!"

"You shouldn't have chosen a first-floor apartment with quick access to the outside door as your base of operations. I can be gone before anyone reacts to your screams. And besides, no one reacts to screams in this part of town. Face it, alien: your role in this attempted takeover is about to end."

Her eyes dance about the room, and she edges toward the bedroom. Tanner knows he will not let her reach it, but he will allow

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her to get close. "But—but you're wrong about me! I'm not one of the aliens! I—I'm a defender, too!"

Tanner smiles sadly. "*Protector*."

"Well, it's the same thing! I mean, we're just a different group! We ought to join forces, don't you think?"

Tanner chuckles softly. How he loves to see them desperate! "Forget trying to fool me, Eunice. Or whatever your name is. Prepare to die."

Suddenly she stops her moves toward the bedroom, and the fear leaves her face. "I really cannot reach you, Arlen." The abrupt flatness of her voice startles him. "You are immune. It's your insanity. We have never been able to really fool the insane, and yet they do not usually suspect us in the first place."

"Verrry good!" he says, delighted. "This sounds like it's going to be a great confession! *Do* go on!"

"Your bullets cannot harm me, Arlen," she says, voice remaining flat. "But you needn't try to kill me, really. We are not here to take over your planet. What would we want with it? We are merely students conducting behavioral experiments, of which my study of human sexuality is a pleasurable sideline. Our main objective is to introduce elements of irritation into your everyday lives, and to observe how you cope, individually and collectively."

Tanner feels a tightness in his throat. He has never heard one speak like *this*.

"They are only minor irritants, however," she continues. "Like the other line always moving faster. And have you ever noticed that when you drop a piece of toast in a restaurant, it always lands buttered-side-down? That's one of my favorites. And you never have the correct change in your pockets, do you? You must always break another bill and be burdened with still *more* change. But really, Arlen, we do not tamper with major events or alter the course of your history, though we could. You have nothing to fear from us. So go, save your bullets, and seek professional help for the anomalies in your thought patterns."

Tanner feels his hands trembling now, but the Voice urges him on, and he forces a grin. "Good," he says. "Very good. Better than any of the others, by far. You almost convinced me. But the Voice still guides me, alien! It won't work!"

Her eyes widen again, but this time they show curiosity, not fear. "Others? How many others?"

He hesitates, but decides there is no harm in telling her. "Twenty-seven," he says, proudly.

"But that's impossible. We haven't—oh. I see." She sighs. "It

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would seem that we two have been touched by the long arm of pure, *unaltered* chance, Arlen. Very well, then. I suppose there's no talking you out of it . . . Go ahead and shoot."

Do it, says the Voice. *Don't let her calmness fool you. Complete the mission, immediately.*

Thus reassured, Tanner aims at her heart, pulls the trigger . . . and misses. Not entirely—as the dull "pop" is heard from the silencer, the alien grabs her left shoulder and winces in pain—but he has missed her heart. A second shot will be necessary, for the first time in his career as Protector. He fires again, but this time the bullet misses her entirely and strikes the edge of the bedroom door-frame, splintering it loudly. This isn't possible, Tanner thinks. It's nearly point-blank range!

"No more bullets will strike me, Arlen," says the alien. "I can direct them away with little effort. I allowed one to strike me in an easily repaired area, because there is something I wish you to see."

Tanner feels himself shaking uncontrollably. He leaps toward her, presses the gun into her stomach, and tugs at the trigger repeatedly . . . but the gun is jammed.

"The gun will not work, Arlen. Now, look."

As she takes her hand from the wound, Tanner steps back, aghast. A thick, greenish-yellow liquid is oozing slowly from the hole in her dress. "Behold my blood, Arlen," she says softly. "And now tell me—what was the color of the *others'* blood? What was the color, Arlen?"

He feels his face freeze into a fool's mask, mouth and eyes wide open, head shaking from side to side in childish denial. *Red*, says the Voice, but it sounds different now, more like his own, more like the *old* voice that used to haunt and mock him before he became a Protector. *Red was the color, red red no yellow but no blood is yellow. Aliens lie deceive the Voice was wrong and oh God the motherless children . . .*

And Tanner is running. Out of the apartment, out the front door of the building, and down the street past the adult bookstores and strip joints and porno theaters, bouncing off hydrants and poles and people, running for his old Dodge Dart parked two blocks away. And all the while the new voice that is really the old voice shouts in his inner ear . . .

Red blood they're everywhere lying changing taking over the other line moves faster and now their mothers are dead they're not robot props they're alone like Arlen when she left us so young and the aliens don't bleed red . . .

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And now he reaches his car, throws open the door and falls, panting and sweating, across the front seat. Still, the new/old voice will not stop; even his screams cannot drown it out.

Red red blood they couldn't jam the gun now the enemy within within me must protect Earth from the enemy within me . . .

Suddenly, Tanner stops screaming and smiles at the stars—the cold, condemning stars—that peer down at him through the car's windshield. He smiles because he feels the gun still in his hand, and because he is somehow certain that now it will work.

And because he now believes that with one more shot, Earth can be saved. ●

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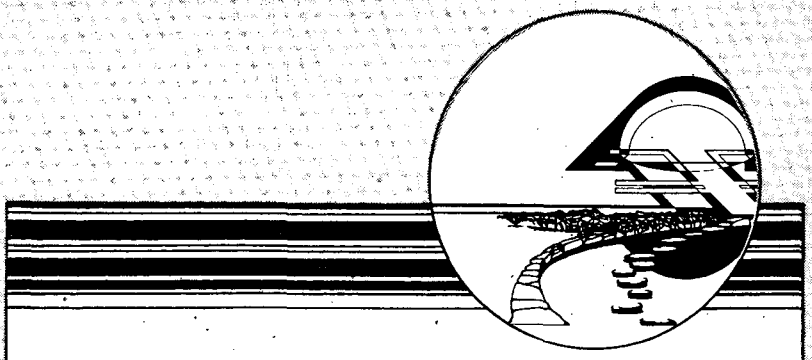

SYRUP

Carbon or
silicon or other
-based, the syrup
when the body becomes alien
and needs to melt, to flow
into every crevice of indifferent
landscape, the other alien form.
The mind creaks, the mind
craves control, but when the body
becomes alien, and needs
to flow, there is no remedy
but to release, to let go
and to melt upon itself,
to flow easily into alien canyons,
arroyos of the nightself, sweet peaks
light years from any daily life.
To know thyself,
to know the other,
is to melt all down
like a candle, all your conviction
of a separable self—
burning.

—Steve Rasnic Tem

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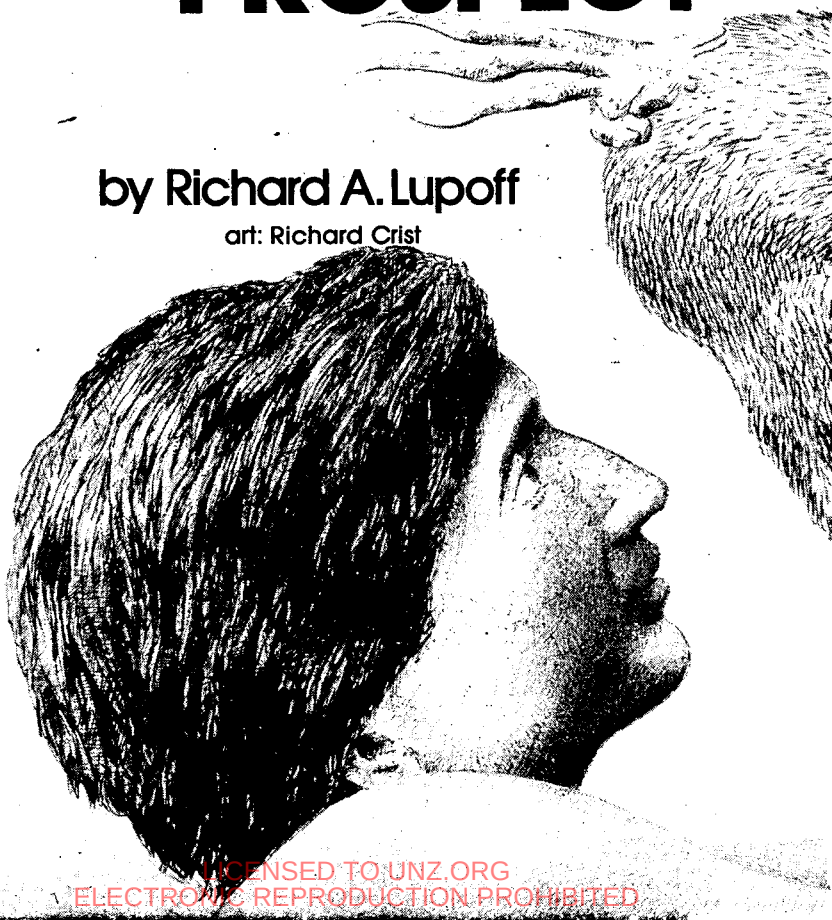
STOMPING DOWN STROKA PROSPECT

by Richard A. Lupoff

art: Richard Crist



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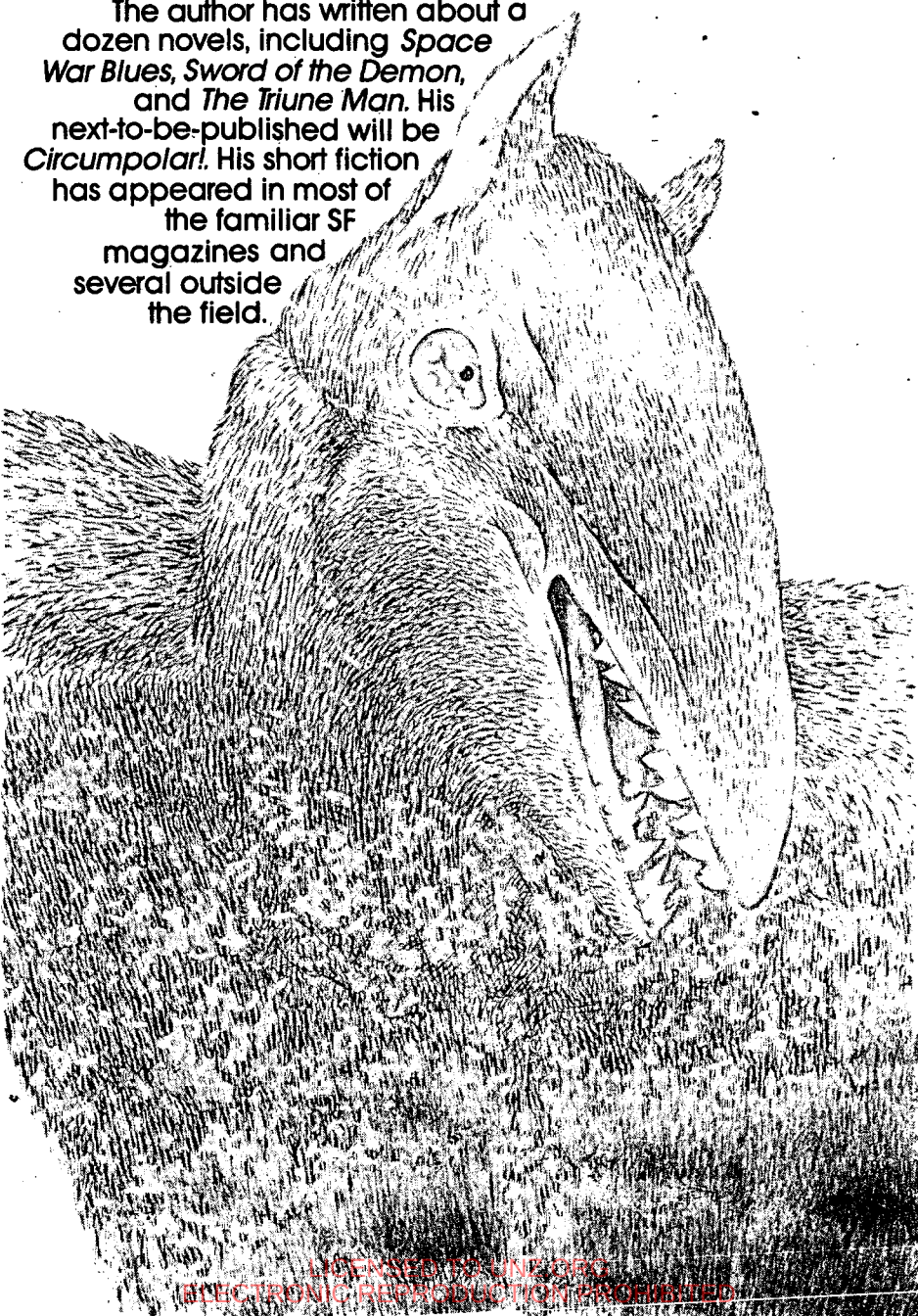
The author has written about a dozen novels, including *Space War Blues, Sword of the Demon,* and *The Triune Man.* His next-to-be-published will be *Circumpolar!.* His short fiction has appeared in most of the familiar SF magazines and several outside the field.



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Khius-6 left Planetoid Mining Station #18. Six workers were on board. They were singing traditional songs.

Alphabetically listed, the workers' names were Dobrolovsky, Komarov, Korniev, Nedelin, Patsayev, and Volkov.

For short hops within the planetoid belt, mere *Khius* class devices provided sufficient transport. The *Khius* was a mere rack, seats mounted on a horizontal shaft, propelled by the release of pressurized vapor. Korniev, the nominal commander, sat at the rear and manipulated a tiller, steering the little ship.

Workers off-shift at Planetoid Mining Station #18 were free to choose their own activities. Off-shift occurred once every ten on-shifts. On-shifts alternated with rest-shifts during other periods of time.

Off-shift workers chose from various optional activities. Some spent their off-shifts in training classes, hoping to better themselves and raise their professional standing. Some took part in voluntary political discussions or indoctrination. There, word was passed of problems both in exotic stations and on the home planet Earth: word of continuing troubles with Sino-adventurists and other dangerous characters.

A few workers studied science, information of no direct application to their regular tasks but of possible ultimate utility. For instance, they studied exobiology, the study of the few primitive organic forms that had been found in the solar system.

(Also, for a few qualified individuals with high clearances, information was given on the Polnyiki, alien creatures encountered in remote stretches of the solar system. The Polnyiki claimed that their home world lay beyond the Veil Nebula in Cirrus, NGC 6992. They claimed to have arrived in the solar system aboard their own spacecraft, but refused to show their ship or reveal its location.)

Back at Station #18, other workers used off-shift time to send video transmissions to their families on Earth, to write letters home, using old-fashioned nib-and-dip steel pens, or to listen to music or practice playing instruments.

Ivan Korniev steered *Khius-6* carefully toward its landing.

In their rack seats, all six workers finished a song and peered ahead through tumbling planetoids. Naturally, they all wore spacesuits. It was the only safe way to travel through the void except in sealed capsules like those used for travel between Earth and the planetoid belt.

Viktor Patsayev, seated center-right on the *Khius*-rack, felt

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sweat running down his face. His spacesuit was powered, as was normal, by the body heat of its wearer. Even so, Viktor sweated. His suit did not utilize body heat with total efficiency. The excess heat kept the spaceman in annoying discomfort.

The aliens, Viktor had heard, were cool. Patsayev lacked a high security rating. He was officially unaware of the existence of Polnyiki. But rumors spread information—and possibly disinformation—about Polnyiki and all other topics.

Viktor leaned his forehead against the sweat pad inside his helmet. He closed his eyes and fell into a half-doze. He found himself dreaming of Polnyiki. He was in one of their spacecraft, surrounded by strange instruments and strange creatures. The Polnyiki were tall, taller than men, and shaped like acute triangles standing on point.

Polnyiki were wider at the shoulders than a man, with little claw-hands at the end of their shoulder blades. Their skin was covered with a short, soft, brown, bristly coat. The Polnyiki's face resembled that of a bat with a long snout, sharp teeth, large shiny eyes and upright pointed ears.

The nearest alien to Viktor reached forward with its claw-hands and wrapped them around Patsayev. Viktor realized that he was nude. His face brushed against the alien's chest. The Polnyik's chest was cool. Polnyiki body temperature was very low. Human body temperature was 37°; that of Polnyiki must be 30° at most.

Being embraced by the Polnyik was like being enveloped in a cool, bristly hide. Naked, Viktor Patsayev realized that he was sexually aroused. Strange alien music, Polnyiki music, beat in his ears, in his heart, in his blood. Patsayev's breath rasped loudly.

He was shaken awake by Vladimir Komarov, his rack seatmate. Komarov was laughing.

Patsayev heard Komarov's laughter through his suit-radio link-up. "Wake up, Comrade-driller! Your gasps are spoiling our song. Some holiday you're going to have in Novaya Zvezdograd, if you can't even stay awake! You'd have done better to stay behind and save your money for something else!"

Viktor pressed his shoulders back inside his spacesuit. He stretched his arms and legs, wiggled his fingers and toes. "Thank you, Vladimir Ivanovich. I dozed off, I know."

"Well, look," Komarov said, pointing ahead. "I can see the lights of the cosmodrome. In a few minutes we'll be walking the streets of a real town for a change, instead of being stuck inside a mining planetoid all our lives!"

"Good. I have a wad of rubles burning a hole in my pocket."

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Patsayev patted the trouser leg of his spacesuit. "I can use some fun for a change."

With a puff of compressed vapor, *Khius-6* went nose-up over the landing-pad of Gagarin Cosmodrome. Pilot-commander Korniev swung *Khius*'s tiller, manipulated vapor, leveled metal rack, and dropped slowly onto pad.

At *Khius*'s smooth landing, the vacationing workers thanked Korniev for his efforts. "A pleasant journey, Ivan Ivanovich," Viktor heard Dobrolovsky say to Korniev.

"And a pleasant stay followed by a safe return, Georgi Pavelvich," Korniev replied.

Once in the town of Novaya Zvezdograd, they were able to crack helmets from sealing-rings. Six visiting workers, still wearing spacesuits but with helmets tilted and gloves tucked in suit-pockets, started down Stroka Prospekt, main street of the town of Novaya Zvezdograd.

They breathed air provided by the town council. Above their heads was what seemed to be naked sky. Across the sky ranged thousands of planetoids, irregularly scattered and arranged, seeming to tumble about one another in the eternal seemingly random dance of the planetoid belt.

But Patsayev stopped in his tracks and gazed at the sky above his head. Was it nighttime or daytime? he wondered. He even wondered if there were such a thing as day and night on this planetoid. In Planetoid Mining Station #18 there was day and night, but they were produced by turning lights on and off in sections of honeycombed planetoid.

On-shift was lighted. Rest-shift was dark.

Work areas in mining shafts were illuminated for work. Work areas on surface of planetoid were also illuminated.

"What's the matter, Comrade?"

Patsayev turned to see who spoke. In the ambient atmosphere of Stroka Prospekt, everybody's voice sounded different from the way it had sounded via suit-radio aboard *Khius*.

"That isn't the real sky," Viktor said to Komarov.

"Of course not. Oh, I had very nearly forgotten, Comrade, that you've never been to Novaya Zvezdograd before. Well, they have to keep this sealed environment so nobody has to wear a spacesuit. It's a lot pleasanter to keep our helmets open and our gloves off, don't you agree, Viktor Sergeievich?"

Stroka Prospekt was crowded and bustling with planetoid miners on holiday. Hundreds of mining stations like Planetoid Mining

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Station #18 called upon recreation towns like Novaya Zvezdograd scattered throughout the belt of planetoids.

Retail establishments catering to the needs of vacationing miners lined the streets of the town. Local economy was based on providing food, lodging, and entertainment for visitors. Music halls offered every variety of music from back home on Earth, as well as the unusual rough music developed by the miners themselves.

They were pioneers, they knew, and wherever pioneers went to open up new frontiers, they took musical instruments with them and created new music to match the spirit of those new frontiers. Viktor was especially fond of the guitar and fiddle music that the American pioneers of the eighteenth century had created, as they traveled westward from the Mississippi River to build Montana and Utah.

There were shops peddling jewelry and knicknacks. Viktor thought of visiting a shop and purchasing a remembrance gift for his mother back in Kiev. She must miss him, he knew! He wasn't the worthy son he wanted to be, but he had somehow never got the knack of chatting in a natural manner into a recorder, his image to be transmitted back over the millions of kilometers to Earth, as some of his buddies had. And when it came to the art of the steel-nib pen, he was even worse!

But perhaps he could find some lovely bit of planetoid pyrite or of glowing pseudo-jade and have it polished and mounted as a pin to send home.

"Come along, fellows. Don't just stand there gawking like hayseeds! Besides, you're impeding progress!"

The speaker was a Workers' Patrolman in the powder-blue tunic and dark trousers of his calling. To Viktor's relief, the patrolman was a good-natured fellow with ruddy cheeks and thinning hair. He smiled at the group as they stepped toward the side of the street and let a cart trundle by on its whooshing air-jets.

Ivan Korniev herded the others onto a stationary sidewalk.

Traffic continued to pass them by. Here it was entirely foot traffic: vacationers from mining settlements, workers from scientific research stations. Men in the uniforms of People's Military Services, smart tunics buttoned and metalwork aglitter, as was fitting.

Viktor felt the same kind of disorientation he had felt as a child emerging from the Gorki Cinema. The Gorki, an ancient legitimate theater converted to a motion picture exhibition hall before Viktor's birth, was also a confined environment. Fans blew re-

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cycled air through the auditorium and lobby. There were no windows in the Gorki; all lighting in the building was artificial.

The ceiling in the lobby was high overhead. It was painted a dark blue, almost black. Small points of light were painted on the ceiling to simulate stars. There was even a concealed projector that showed the images of false clouds moving across the imaginary midnight sky.

When a youth brigade outing that included Viktor had been taken by their adult guides to a special matinee showing of a film on the Great Patriotic War, Viktor had become altogether absorbed. When the film ended, Viktor had no idea how long he had been in the theater.

Had the film lasted for a mere fraction of an hour, or for many hours? He did not know.

When the audience filed from the auditorium into the lobby, Viktor had still been in a daze. Staring at the lobby ceiling with its facsimile of the night sky, Viktor had become convinced that he was already outside the building, in some sort of enclosed courtyard, and that it was indeed a balmy night outside.

Passing through the main portals of the theater, expecting to encounter cool and darkness, he had been dazzled instead to confront a bright, late-afternoon sky.

Dazed, his dilated pupils dazzled and watering, he had staggered and nearly fallen to the pavement.

The leader of his youth brigade had spoken to him.

"Are you ill, Viktor Sergeievich? Do you wish to be taken to a first-aid station?"

"Comrade, I'm all right, thank you," Viktor had managed to stammer in reply. But his mental state continued confused for quite a while, until he realized what had happened to him.

He carried the memory of the incident with him to this day.

A couple of men in glittering bronze-colored spacesuits halted and gazed at Viktor's party. Viktor was puzzled by their appearance. Their spacesuits were made of some unusual material. Viktor could not understand how it would withstand the rigors of vacuum and radiation.

Their gloves were of similar bronze-colored material. They fitted closely. Again, Viktor was puzzled by their seemingly impractical design.

No helmets were visible on the spacemen's collar rings. Their hair and faces had the appearance of just having emerged from a modeling studio or barber's salon and dermatologist's treatment room.

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They exchanged hissing comments, nodded agreement with each other in an odd way that seemed to imply mutual disapproval of Viktor's group. Then they passed beyond the group and disappeared in the crowd.

Beside Patsayev, Komarov laughed. Viktor expressed his bewilderment.

"Don't you comprehend, Viktor Sergeievich?" Komarov inquired.

"Comrade, I don't. I've never seen anybody like those two in my life."

Komarov put his arm around Patsayev's shoulders and squeezed. "That's just the latest fashion here," he said. "You'll get used to it. Once you've seen more of these holiday towns, you'll learn what it's all about."

"Pardon me, Comrade," Patsayev persisted. "But I still don't understand. Were they actors of some sort? Is someone making an entertainment film about spacemen?"

"No, no! You are a hayseed, aren't you, Viktor Sergeievich? Where did you say you were from? Kiev, wasn't it? I thought that was a very sophisticated town. It's just a fashion. The people in these towns are very faddish. You'll visit one of these towns one season and everybody you meet will be wearing cossack outfits. Another time, they'll all be dressed as revolutionary workers or as football players.

"It doesn't mean anything. They just have to be in fashion. Those who refuse to go along with the fad are looked down upon."

"I see," Patsayev said dubiously. "And the current fad is to dress as spacemen, whether one is a spaceman or not. Is that correct, Comrade?"

Komarov nodded.

"Come over here."

He led Patsayev to a shopfront. A vertical plane of condensed air flowed between the window display and passersby. Crystal mannequins posed with more grace than Viktor found pleasing. They were dressed in spacemen's outfits: lightweight suits designed to simulate full space armor with portable life-support systems; military force spacesuits marked with portentous insignia (these mannequins also carried menacing-appearing weapons slung over their shoulders or brandished in their slim, tapering hands); ship-fitters' outfits complete with tinted faceplates and portable welders' kits, spanners, and drivers.

"You see, Comrade?"

At last Viktor understood. He nodded dumbly.

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Although Viktor's party had traveled together from their mining station and had agreed at a time to reassemble for their trip home aboard their *Khius-6*, all were free to mingle with the crowds in the streets of Novaya Zvezdograd. That was part of their agreement also. Korniev had placed his seal of approval on that arrangement.

Viktor saw a few of his party enter an opening marked "Yuri's Place." He poked his head inside and decided for the moment that it was an eating house. Then he decided that there was very little eating going on in Yuri's Place. It was more of a drinking house.

Viktor exchanged glances with Komarov and they entered the place.

Inside, Yuri's was dark. A long bar of polished wood or some kind of simulated wood ran along one wall. There was a large polished mirror behind the bar. Rows of tall bottles lined the wall, also. There were several bartenders, all dressed in simulated spacemen's garb, all of them busy serving drinks.

Customers lined the bar, leaning their feet on a polished brass rail. Most of them also wore spacemen's outfits. A few were dressed in ordinary worker's costumes.

Viktor saw Georgi Dobrolovsky and Vladislav Volkov. They had found a vacant table in the place and were sitting down. Viktor saw a waiter approach Dobrolovsky and Volkov. The waiter wore a shining spacesuit. It was difficult to tell the color of the material in the dim and shifting light of the place. Probably the suit was pale pink trimmed in equally pale blue. Perhaps its colors had been brighter at one time and they had faded with use.

Volkov looked at Patsayev and Komarov. "Hello, Comrades. Pull up chairs for yourselves. Sit down and have a drink with us. Comrade, a moment!" He signaled to the waiter.

"Thank you, Vladislav Nikolaievich, but not now."

The waiter left.

"Viktor Sergeievich and I are going to see a bit more of the town before we settle down anywhere. Besides, Mitrofan Alexandreievich and Ivan Ivanovich are still outside waiting for us. We only ducked our heads in here so Viktor could see the place. What a greenhorn! You'd think someone from Kiev would know more of the world, but I suppose there are innocents everywhere."

Patsayev was listening to the dialogue with only one ear. With the other he was listening to the band that stood on a low dais in one corner of the place. There were three musicians or possibly four. It was hard to tell in the dark place.

The music they were playing was scratchy and simple. The

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melody was being carried by some kind of instrument that the player bowed like a fiddle. There was also some kind of strummed instrument that played a few chords alternately. The player made a simple progression of them, going round and round. There were also one or two singers.

The singers' accent was a strange one. Patsayev could barely make out the meaning of the song. It had something to do with a spaceman returning to his home from a distant war. When he got home, his farm was burned and his family murdered.

"Come on, Comrade." Komarov pulled Viktor by one elbow. Viktor hung back, listening to the singers' words, letting himself be removed slowly from the place. As Vladimir Ivanovich tugged him through the door, he saw the waiter returning to Dobrolovsky's and Volkov's table with a bottle and two glasses on a round tray.

Nedelin and Korniev were standing outside of Yuri's Place, letting the flow of foot traffic tumble past them on either side. In the passing crowd Patsayev thought for one moment he had seen the tall, thin, light brown form of a Polnyik, but when he looked again all he saw was the continuing flow of real and false spacemen mixed together.

"So, Comrade." Korniev put his hand on Viktor's shoulder. "What do you think of Novaya Zvezdograd?"

Patsayev considered. "It's hard to tell, Comrade. All I've seen of this planetoid is the cosmodrome and Yuri's Place. I'd like to see more of it before I make a judgment."

Korniev nodded. "A wise attitude. Well, then, let's explore a bit."

Before they moved away a newsboy approached hawking the latest paper. Yes, even in this modern age, a few of the old traditions hung on.

Viktor reached into his pocket and extracted a few kopeks. He whistled to the newsboy and bought a copy of the paper from him. The name of the paper was *Novaya Zvezdogradnaya Gazeta*. The others clustered around Viktor as he read the headlines aloud.

The main concern of the day was continued incidents on Earth. Continued Chinese advances into the Pacific Basin were cause of grave concern in Moscow, New York, Rio, and other progressive capitals. Severe warnings had been issued against further Sino aggression. Provocations and inflammatory statements had been roundly denounced.

"Won't they ever learn, Comrades?" Ivan Korniev shook his head despairingly. "Even after all these years!"

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Patsayev turned the pages. Inside the paper, below the fold on a left-hand page, was an interesting item. An expedition was being outfitted for the exploration of the region of Neptune. Volunteers were called for.

"Do you think there will be mines on Neptune?" Mitrofan Nedelin pointed at the item.

"Ah, you're too old, Comrade. Exploration is a young man's business. We old ones stay close to home and tend to the dull but necessary tasks."

Nedelin grunted.

"Have a look here, Comrades." Komarov led the way to a serious dry-goods shop. The objects on display bore a certain resemblance to those Viktor Patsayev had seen in the stylish shop earlier. But where the merchandise in the other shop had been flimsy, designed clearly for appearance alone, these were different. Heavy space gear and well-made equipment were laid out in a businesslike fashion.

"That's a lot better!" Komarov nodded in approval.

Patsayev felt the wad of ruble notes in his pocket. He could well use a new ore-pick. The workers at the mining station owned all of their supplies and equipment communally, in theory. But by tacit agreement, miners were permitted to purchase special items. They then contributed them to the common store and had prior claim to their use as long as they remained assigned to the station.

Once a miner was transferred away, his "private" tools became common property of those remaining behind. The system skirted the boundaries of ideological incorrectness, but on a pragmatic level it worked.

"Comrades, what about a little refreshment?" Korniev asked.

The others agreed.

They all piled into a place called Old Uncle Josef's.

It was a quieter and more orderly place than Yuri's. There were tablecloths, and the music was subdued. The bartender wore a crimson jacket cut off at the waist, with round, polished brass buttons. The waiters wore revolutionary workers' garb rather than spacemen's costumes. There was a large portrait of V. I. Lenin on one wall. The walls themselves were made of imitation wood.

When the waiter approached their table, Mitrofan Nedelin piped up and asked the derivation of the name Old Uncle Josef's.

"It's traditional, Comrade," the waiter said. "It's been here so

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many years, nobody knows who Uncle Josef was— or even if there ever was an Uncle Josef."

They ordered vodka and synthetic caviar on black bread.

A short man with blond locks falling across his forehead stood in a spotlight. He sang sad songs, accompanying himself on an instrument from some volume of ancient history.

Patsayev found his singing offensive. He excused himself from the table and made his way to the comfort station.

There were graffiti on the walls. Viktor was surprised to find evidence of hooliganism in an otherwise well-managed place. While he relieved himself, he read the graffiti, feeling mildly embarrassed and even a little guilty as he did so. Most of the graffiti were the usual vulgar phrases. Some were of a more advanced nature, puns and jokes on Party ideology.

One graffito said, "For a cooling of passion, request Dmitri Mikhailovich at PI's." Beside the graffito was a tiny drawing, hardly more than a crude sketch. It resembled an acute triangle balanced upon its acute angle; upon the opposite side a smaller acute triangle was placed, its second-longest side parallel to the end of the large triangle.

Viktor felt his stomach muscles tighten.

Was this a Polnyik? He could not be certain. The drawing was so crude and so faint, it might have been a mere scuffing of the wall of the comfort station. Viktor leaned his head against the cool wall. After a few minutes he gathered himself and returned to his companions.

"Are you all right, Comrade?" Vladimir Komarov asked solicitously.

"I'm all right, thank you, Comrade." Patsayev downed a slug of vodka. "Let's continue. I want to find a gift for my mother. I want to send her something. I am not as good a son as she deserves."

Komarov accompanied Viktor from the place. Korniev and Nedelin remained behind. "Perhaps we'll see you later on, Comrades," Korniev called as Komarov and Patsayev moved away. "Else we will meet at the cosmodrome, remember."

"Yes, yes." Patsayev and Komarov said as they made their way to the door. They walked along Stroka Prospekt. The crowd was as thick as ever. Beneath the painted and flaking sky, time seemed to stand still.

"One could disappear into this town and never reemerge, Viktor Sergeievich. It's always the same time here, or perhaps it's never

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any time, eh? Midnight or noon, it's all the same. The universe goes by outside, do you ever think about it?

"Do you wonder what your mother is doing in Kiev? Is it morning there or dusk? Don't you wonder? I myself wonder what my wife and child are doing."

Viktor stopped suddenly and laid a hand on Komarov's forearm. "Wife and child?" he repeated.

"Oh, yes, Viktor Sergeievich. I was married once." Komarov nodded. "I had just finished technical institute. Ah, I was going to rise in society, wasn't I! Well, and it seemed so much the thing to do. I married a classmate. She was a very fine woman. Of course there was no way the marriage could succeed."

"Of course not. But you must have been together for some time. And you have a child? Where are they now? You got a divorce, of course, didn't you?"

Komarov shrugged. "What difference, Comrade?"

Patsayev shook his head. "Then you're still married. What a mess. Where are they now, your wife and child? Do you ever have any regrets? Do you find yourself thinking of women? We all have our erotic fantasies, naturally."

"They're in Volgagrad. We exchange greetings every year. She understood."

"That's good. I think my mother secretly disapproves, but she keeps her lips closed about it, so I don't make it an issue. Does your child know? Is it a boy or a girl? How old is it?"

"Come along, Comrade. Let's put our thoughts to the present, not the past. Come, let's shop for that gift you said you wanted. Then we can enjoy ourselves. I'm feeling grubby. I could use a good steaming, couldn't you?"

In a small gift shop Viktor found a present. It was a small brooch of planetoidal schist. It seemed to be a solid, polished stone set in a narrow rim of silver, but in fact there was a cleverly concealed spring. When one touched the spring, the brooch opened to reveal facing silhouette portraits of Marx and Engels.

"Is she a Party member?" the jeweler asked.

"Yes. For many years. Can you send the gift?"

The jeweler said, "Certainly. For a small fee. You know, the freight charges between here and Earth . . . " He spread his hands apologetically.

"No need to make excuses, Comrade," Viktor said. He began peeling ruble notes from his wad.

"Maybe you could send it by surface mail," Komarov jested.

Patsayev and the jeweler laughed heartily. "That's a good one,

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Vladimir Ivanovich. Send it by surface mail. I'll remember that one!"

Outside the shop, Komarov said, "I'm off for a bath now, Viktor Sergeievich. Do you want to come along? One often meets interesting companions that way."

"I think I'd rather sit quietly with a glass of tea and listen to some good music."

"As you wish."

"You know of a place called PI's?"

Komarov nodded. He gave instructions to Patsayev. "If you're sure, Comrade?" he concluded.

Viktor nodded.

They clasped hands and headed off in opposite directions. After taking a few steps Patsayev hesitated, turned, and looked back after Komarov. But the other had disappeared. There was only the unending, milling crowd that filled Stroka Prospekt. Now and then a cart would rumble through.

As Viktor stood uncertainly, he felt a hand laid lightly on his biceps. He looked into the face of a slightly built, fair-haired man in pastel pseudo-space outfit.

The fellow smiled at Viktor. He was half a head shorter than Viktor and couldn't have weighed more than 45 kilograms. "Are you alone, spaceman? Would you like to have a drink together? Can you buy a round?"

Viktor shrugged off the man's hand and shook his head.

"No need to be hostile, Comrade," the man said.

"I'm sorry, Comrade. I was just looking for a place called PI's. My companion gave me directions but I'm new in town—"

"Pardon me for saying so," the other interrupted, "but that's an obvious fact."

"Do you know the way?"

The man slipped his arm through Patsayev's bent elbow. A small thrill went through Viktor's body, going from his elbow and his ribs to his feet. As they walked, the man's hip and thigh brushed lightly against Viktor's.

The place called PI's was large and warm, decorated with red plush-cushioned furniture and filigree. It had the smell of decadence to it. Viktor found himself both repelled and attracted by the place. He wondered why it was permitted to operate, why the Workers' Patrol didn't raid the place and tear away the imitation velvet hangings and fumigate the joint.

The waiter knew Patsayev's new companion, whose name was

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Valentine Petrovich, and he and the pale man called each other by their patronymics.

The PI in the name of the joint stood for what Viktor hoped it would stand for. There was even a framed, oval portrait of Tchaikovsky on the cover of the menu. On the back of the menu cover was embossed a matching portrait of the French diva Desiree Artot.

Viktor found the image disquieting and turned back to the portrait of Tchaikovsky.

A chamber orchestra played quietly, and conversation in the room was muted to permit the customers to hear the music. At the moment the orchestra was performing a chamber version of *Francesca da Rimini.* The musicians wore costumes of forest-green velvet and ivory-colored lace.

When Patsayev heard his companion call the waiter by name, he knew that he had to speak with the waiter. "Excuse me, please, Valentine Petrovich," Patsayev said to his companion. "Excuse me. I'll be back quickly."

He rose from his seat and moved toward an alcove where he assumed the comfort station would be concealed. He planned his moment and his course carefully so as to pass the waiter's station *en route* to the alcove.

He hesitated for a moment, hoping that Valentine Petrovich's eyes were not on his back but fearing to make himself obvious by turning around. To the waiter he said, "Dmitri Mikhailovich."

The waiter nodded almost imperceptibly. A glance passed between the eyes of the two. "Yes, Comrade?" the waiter said softly. "Do you need something?"

"I'm feeling—uncomfortably warm," Patsayev almost gasped.

He saw the waiter's eyes flick around the room. The two of them stepped into the alcove. It indeed concealed the comfort station. There were no other men there at the moment.

"Did you wish to cool off, Comrade?" the waiter asked.

Viktor nodded. He wanted to speak, but he was trembling and he was afraid that his words would emerge as a humiliating squeak, like a schoolboy quivering in terror.

"It can be arranged, Comrade." The waiter moved one hand in an unmistakable gesture.

Viktor reached into his pocket. He pulled out his wad of ruble notes, peeled one off, and looked at the waiter. The expression in the waiter's face was also unmistakable. The ruble note would not begin to be enough. Viktor peeled off five.

Not enough.

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Ten.

The waiter shook his head. "Five hundred," the waiter murmured.

Viktor recoiled in shock. Five hundred! That would all but wipe him out. He wanted to ask the waiter if he had any notion what a miner's wages were, how long and hard a man had to work to save up five hundred rubles.

But the waiter spoke before Viktor could bring himself to say anything. "This is only because you came with Valentine Petrovich. Any friend of his, you know, Comrade. Otherwise it would be more, much more. How many places in Novaya Zvezdograd do you think you can . . . cool off . . . like this?"

The intonation with which the waiter spoke the words *cool off* made Patsayev feel as if a cold metal band had been clamped to his sweating brow.

"All right, all right," he muttered.

The waiter stood with his hand out.

"Right here?" Viktor said. "How do I know—"

The waiter turned and started to leave the comfort station.

"All right!" Viktor spoke more rapidly and more loudly than he had wished. The waiter stopped and turned back toward him.

In the sudden silence of the comfort station, Viktor could hear the sound of the chamber orchestra from outside. They had completed the piece they were playing earlier and were performing a transcription of an aria from the opera *The Queen of Spades*.

The waiter held out his hand.

Viktor peeled off five hundred rubles and laid them in the waiter's hand.

The waiter counted the notes carefully, nodding with each note, licking his thumb as he counted each note.

For some reason Viktor found the gesture, the sight of the waiter raising his hand to his mouth, opening his lips, licking his thumb repeatedly, erotically suggestive in a disgusting way. He wanted to turn his face, to look away from the sight, but he distrusted the waiter and dared not look away.

After what seemed like hours the waiter gave a final nod, folded the wad of notes and slipped them inside his own trousers. Viktor folded his pitiful remaining rubles and slipped them back in his pocket.

The waiter stepped to a service closet and opened it. It contained the expected implements to be found in a comfort station: mops, cleaning pail, extra soaps, and towels.

In the back of the closet a dingy panel opened, revealing a flight

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of narrow stairs. The waiter gestured Viktor ahead of him, closed the panel, followed Viktor up the narrow stairs.

At the head of the staircase was another dingy door. Before either of them could reach for it, the door was opened from the inside and a spaceman strode heavily out. He locked eyes momentarily with Patsayev. Viktor could not read the message in the man's eyes.

He did recognize the other's outfit as being actual miners' garb. It was not the ersatz stuff that so many in Stroka Prospekt favored. If Viktor had had more opportunity, he could have told much about the miner's work, the task to which he was usually assigned, even the station to which he was assigned.

But there was not time for this. The man brushed past Patsayev and the waiter and was gone, plunging down the staircase and through the panel at its bottom.

The waiter pushed ahead of Patsayev, glanced briefly around the room, and stepped back out. He shoved Patsayev forward by one elbow, saying, "All right, Comrade. Don't take too long, or we'll have to drag you out of here. You won't enjoy that, I can assure you!"

Viktor heard the door slam behind him. He was almost blinded in the room. There were great illumination fixtures in the ceiliig and on the walls. There were no windows. Even the floor was painted a light color. It was tracked and scratched, but still it reflected much of the light in the room.

Viktor could hear music floating up from the place downstairs. The orchestra was performing a chamber transcription of *Winter Dreams*.

The room was chilly. Viktor was drenched in sweat. Now that he turned cold, the sweat seemed to run to the toes of his boots and puddle there like cold swamp water on a January day.

There was a rustling sound.

Viktor looked, squinting his eyes against the brightness. A planetoid miner learns to work in the eternal nighttime of the belt of planetoids. His eyes had a hard time adjusting themselves to this glare. He rubbed them with his hands.

The brown fur approached and loomed over him. It was taller than a man by thirty centimeters at least. At the shoulders it was far broader than a man, but its little claw-hands grew from its shoulders. It had no arms as such.

An almost palpable chill exuded from it.

The membrane stretched from its shoulders to its ankles. There

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was hardly any body to it, just a thin triangular membrane with claw-feet on the bottom.

One could not tell whether its coat was truly a pelt of short, bristly hair or not. Maybe it was a layer of pinfeathers or a kind of toughened down.

It might have evolved from something like a bat or something like a bird.

Viktor looked up at the Polnyik's face. Against the bright glare of the ceiling he couldn't tell if it was a true snout or a kind of beak.

He shuddered.

He turned his face, leaned forward, laid his sweating cheek lightly against the Polnyik's chest. The creature moved. It seemed to have no large bones but a flexible latticework of heavy cartilage under its hide.

It bent itself at the shoulders and laid its claw-hands on Viktor's shoulders. It made little tugging movements at Viktor's suit.

Viktor shook himself. He stepped back. The creature dipped its muzzle or beak at him. It had glistening fangs. It ran its claws over his shoulders again. It released him and patted his face, both of his cheeks, with its claws.

With a sudden resolution Viktor stepped away from the Polnyik. He noticed a long pallet on the floor. Long enough for the Polnyik to stretch out on. Viktor unclasped his space-tunic and pulled it off. He climbed from his boots and heavy trousers. In a moment he stood naked, staring at the creature.

This was his dream. This was his strange fantasy.

Why had he not reported to the medical bureau? There was something wrong with him to feel sexual desire for this alien. There must be, or there would be no need for such a clandestine meeting.

But the authorities attempted to keep the very existence of the Polnyiki a secret. And this—arrangement—he couldn't decide how he felt about it.

There must be many men who wanted these creatures. Else why the graffito in the comfort station, why the clandestine network of contacts, why the Polnyik hidden away up here in this room over PI's?

From below the strains of the *Hamlet* overture wafted up to his ears.

He felt the cold of the Polnyik's approach. It wrapped its broad shoulders around him. He could feel its claw-hands clasp behind him, between his shoulders. The claws tore at the flesh of his

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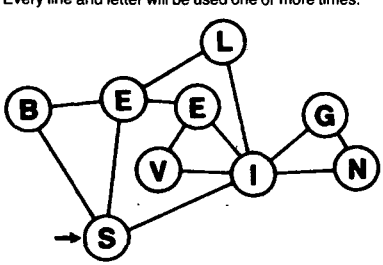
b. 13 = C. in a S.
c. T.D. (and a P. in a P.T.)
d. 9 = I. in a B.G.
e. 9 = P. in the S.S.
f. 30 = D.H.S.A.J. and N.
g. 50 = C. in a H.D.
h. 212 = D. at which W.B.
i. 1 = D. at a T.
j. 12 = S. of the Z.

2 Begin at the arrow and proceed from letter to letter in any direction via connecting lines to form a familiar saying. Every line and letter will be used one or more times.



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back, but not deeply. They were cold. It was like being prodded and scratched by frozen rose thorns.

The Polnyik wrapped itself around him.

He found himself sinking and floating at the same time, the cool presence of the Polnyik enveloping, the soft bristliness of its pelt surrounding him like a winding sheet surrounds the body of a dead man.

He closed his eyes and then opened them again.

He thought he could see some of the light of the room even through the thin body of the Polnyik. He could hear the instruments of the musicians playing downstairs in PI's.

He opened his mouth and gasped for breath. He thought he was suffocating, yet he welcomed the sensation.

The room seemed to throb with the tones of Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet*. Images of the original Shakespeare play as Viktor had seen it in a Mosfilm adaptation rose before Viktor's eyes. Scenes of regicide, incest, and madness.

A convulsion of ecstasy racked his body and he fell into a state of exhaustion.

He could feel the Polnyik moving him, rolling him. It unwrapped its membrane from about him. He opened his eyes and saw it rise and shake itself. It began to preen, using its beak like a bird cleaning its feathers.

The Polnyik caught Viktor's eye. With a silent gesture of its head it signed that he should leave. He began to gather his clothing, stunned by his act.

He had shared sex with an alien.

What had its thoughts been? What had it felt? Did it, like Viktor, respond to the music? Could this alien from Cirrus, NGC 6992, understand a composition by Tchaikovsky based on the play by Shakespeare? The notion was bizarre, incomprehensible.

Why was the Polnyik here at all? It was—some kind of prostitute. That must be the explanation. But how had it got here? Why did it behave so?

Was it a prisoner of some sort? Did it wish to escape from this crib and return to its own world, wherever that was? Or was it here voluntarily? A spy perhaps. Or—the thought left Patsayev dazed—was it a pervert, an outcast among its kind, wallowing here in its own degradation?

Behind Viktor the door to the bright room swung open. The waiter was there. "Your time's up, spaceman." The waiter grabbed Viktor's elbow in the fingers of one hand. Viktor could see another

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man, another customer, standing in the stairwell, waiting his turn.

Viktor locked eyes with the next customer. Then they were past each other. What should he have said to the customer? What could anyone say?

He stumbled down the stairs.

He looked around PI's. The orchestra was still playing. The tune was from *Swan Lake*. It was very sad and even more sinister.

Valentine Petrovich was gone, and a group of men wearing the flowing satin shirts of imitation cossacks were seated at the table. There was a bottle on the table and glasses, and small dishes of food.

The men were conversing among themselves, pretending not to notice the admiring stares that their costumes were drawing from other customers around the room.

It seemed that spaceman clothing was on its way out, to be replaced by satin cossack shirts and baggy trousers tucked into the tops of polished boots.

As Viktor stumbled past the table of cossacks, one of them reached out with a riding crop and tapped him. He stopped and looked at the man.

"In a terrible hurry, are you, Comrade?"

Viktor stared. He was baffled by the man's comment.

What did he want? Was he a security operative? Was this a way of placing Patsayev under arrest? Or was it a warning of some sort?

The strains of *Swan Lake* continued to waft through the place.

The man in cossack garb lowered his riding crop. To his companions he said, "I think there's something the matter with this fellow. Should we call for assistance for him?" To Patsayev he said, "Do you need help, Comrade?"

Viktor shook himself, partially regaining normality. "No! I don't want anyone! No one! Thank you, Comrade, but no!"

He blundered away from the table, out of PI's, into the everlasting midnight-noon of Stroka Prospekt.

He wandered for hours, dodging figures he barely recognized as fellow holiday-makers, avoiding Workers' Patrolmen, hoping to blunder into Komarov, Korniev, Nedelin, Dobrolovsky, Volkov. Half the people he saw seemed to be one or another of his comrades until they drew close. He stared into the faces of multitudes, looking for his friends, finding only strangers.

He was a Diogenes without a lantern.

Somehow he managed to pass the time until the appointed hour

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arrived. He went to the place that had been agreed upon. There were Dobrolovsky and Volkov, waiting. They were the first to arrive.

As Patsayev walked up to them, he saw Komarov arriving also.

"Viktor Sergeievich," Komarov called out, "what in heaven's name has happened to you?"

"I—I—Comrade—" Viktor stammered.

"You've lost your helmet, Comrade. And look at your suit. It looks as if you'd encountered an angry bear!"

Before Viktor could frame an answer, Ivan Korniev strode up. "Comrades, I have grave news for you. Mitrofan Nedelin is no more."

The others gasped. "What happened, Comrade? Do you mean he's been killed? Was there an accident?"

"No accident, Comrade! We were in Old Uncle Josef's. There was some sort of trouble there. A fight broke out. Mitrofan Alexandreievich was mortally wounded. The culprit was caught, naturally. The Workers' Patrol came for him, and he is being questioned now."

"But how could such a thing happen, Ivan Ivanovich? Why would someone bring weapons into Novaya Zvezdograd? Do they think this is Tombstone, Arizona?"

"I don't have the answers to your questions, Comrade. Perhaps the Workers' Patrol will get them out of the fellow. For myself, and strictly unofficially, mind you, I suspect he was an *agent provocateur*."

"Sent by whom?"

"Who can say, Comrade? Only read the papers and draw your own conclusions. At any rate, I have spent the last several hours with the Patrol, facing interrogation myself. They let me go, of course. There was no reason to hold me. They only wanted information, which naturally I was more than willing to provide."

"Naturally."

Korniev looked at Patsayev. "And what about you, Comrade? You look slightly the worse for wear. I hope you didn't fall prey to some gang of hooligans or roughnecks. These frontier towns aren't exactly Leningrad, you know."

Viktor only nodded.

Komarov said, "Come on, Comrade. I'll get you to a dry goods store. You'll have to purchase a helmet before we head for home. And that tunic—I doubt that it can be repaired. Where are your gloves? You've lost those too? This is going to cost you a pretty

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penny, Viktor Sergeievich. I'm afraid this was an expensive holiday for you.

"Well, we'll be back home in a few hours, and tomorrow it's back to work, bright and early. Say, are you all right, Comrade? Are you sure you're all right?" ●

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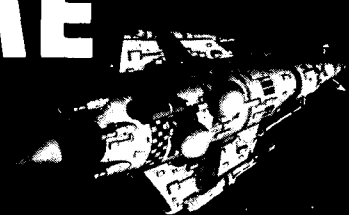

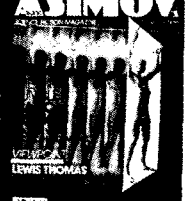

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SOLUTION TO PIGGY'S GLASSES AND THE MOON

Myopic (nearsighted) persons wear corrective lenses that are concave. You can always tell when persons are nearsighted by the fact that their glasses make their eyes look smaller. Presbyopic (farsighted) persons wear convex lenses that magnify their eyes. Only convex lenses will focus light on a small spot. There is no way that the concave lenses of Piggy's spectacles could have been used to start a fire.

Golding's second mistake occurs at the beginning of Chapter 5. The day has just ended, and the stars are starting to come out. An air battle is being fought. Here is how Golding describes what the boys saw in the sky:

> "A sliver of moon rose over the horizon, hardly large enough to make a path of light even when it sat right down on the water; but there were other lights in the sky, that moved fast, winked, or went out, though not even a faint popping came down from the battle fought at ten miles' height. But a sign came down from the world of grownups, though at the time there was no child awake to read it. There was a sudden bright explosion and corkscrew trail across the sky; then darkness again and stars. There was a speck above the island, a figure dropping swiftly beneath a parachute, a figure that hung with dangling limbs. The changing winds of various altitudes took the figure where they would. Then, three miles up, the wind steadied and bore it in a descending curve round the sky and swept it in a great slant across the reef and the lagoon toward the mountain. The figure fell and crumpled among the blue flowers of the mountain-side, but now there was a gentle breeze at this height too and the parachute flopped and banged and pulled. So the figure, with feet that dragged behind it, slid up the mountain. Yard by yard, puff by puff, the breeze hauled the figure thrrough the blue flowers, over the boulders and red stones, till it lay huddled among the shattered rocks of the mountain-top."

The writing is superb, but once again Golding has made a mistake that suggests how little he cared about hard science. It is surprising to learn that Golding first majored in science, at Oxford University, but after two years switched to English literature. And a good thing, too, because apparently his interest in science was minimal. What's absurd about the paragraph quoted above?

See page 105 for the answer.

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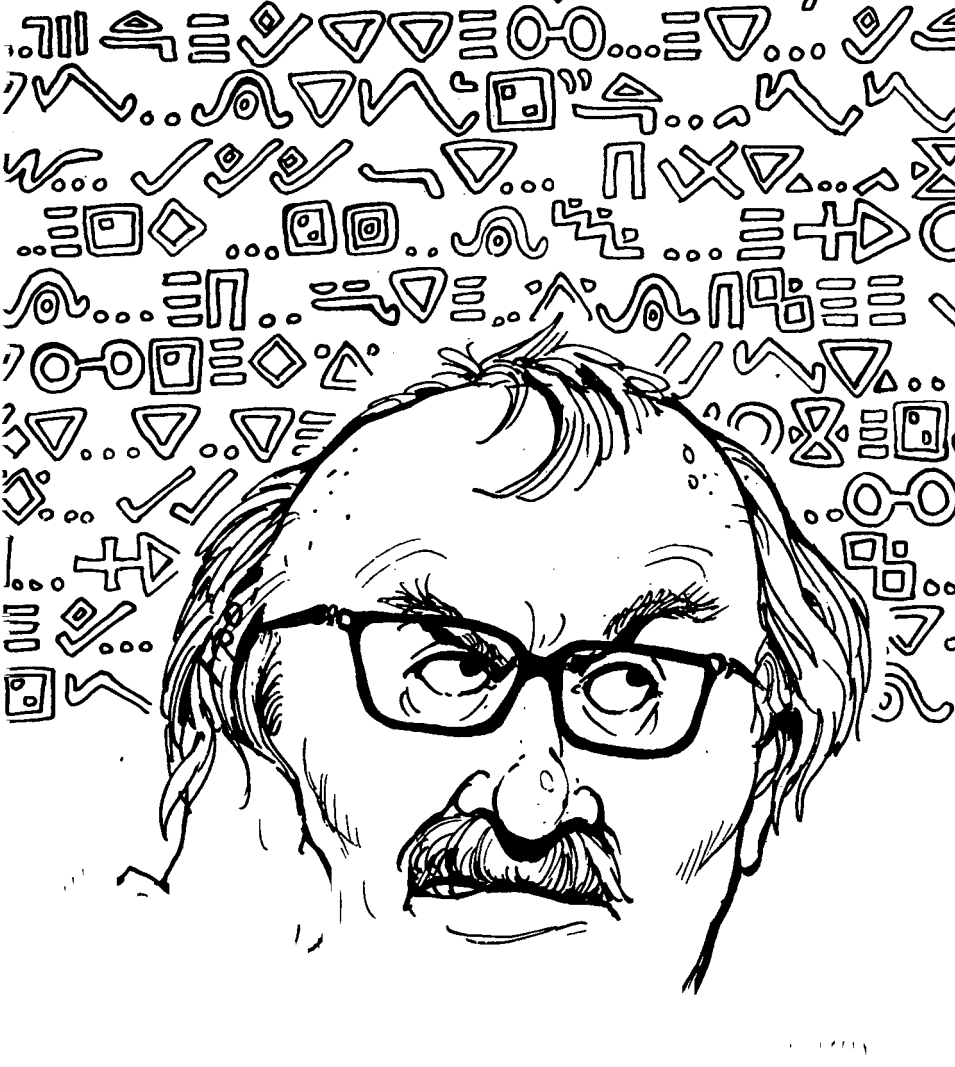

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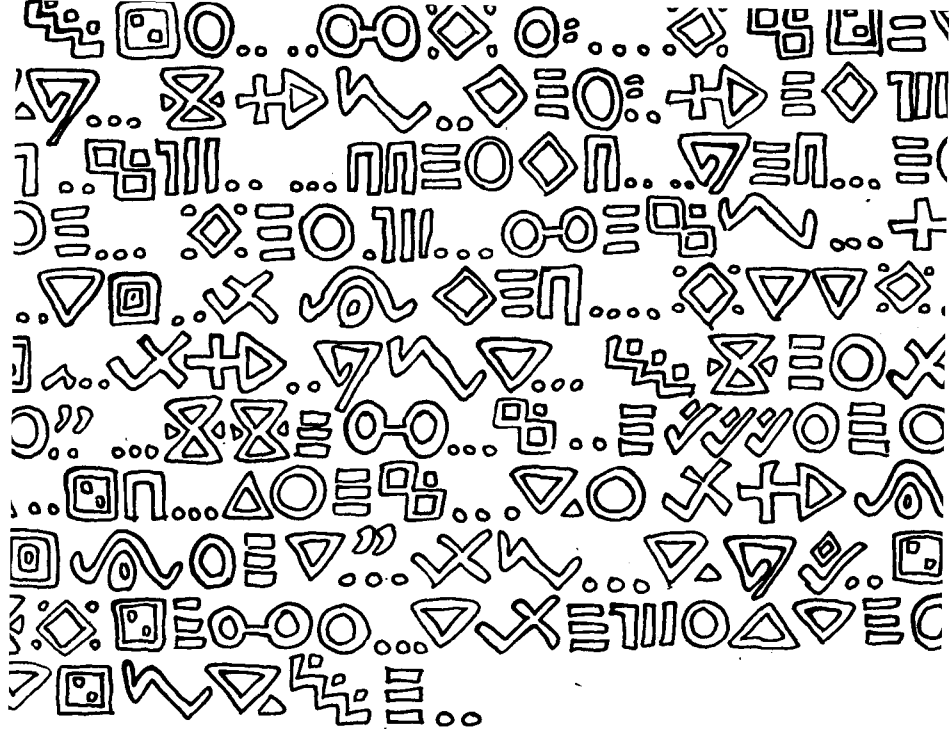

THE MYSTERIOUS CURE

by J. O. Jeppson

art: Tim Kirk

Imagine, if you will,
a tale told by several people,
none of whom know all of it until it
is at an end. "Why," said Dr. Jeppson, "that
reminds me of something
that happened just
the other day...

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"How did you do it?" said the Youngest Member of Pshrinks Anonymous, addressing one of the Interpersonals who infested, according to the Oldest Member, the weekly luncheon meetings of the Psychoanalytic Alliance. "How did you manage to cure Mr. ——— in one session?"

"No names!" shouted the Oldest Member, in a bad mood ever since he'd discovered that the main course was to be Logorrheic Liver Lasagna.

The Youngest Member gulped.

"Well, I —" began the Interpersonal.

"Now see here!" said the Oldest Member. "Since I've heard the name, I assume that it's the same patient I did a consultation on after he was discharged from the hospital last year. No one could have cured him in one session."

The O.M. turned to one of his Freudian colleagues, a quiet man who seldom spoke. "I distinctly remember sending that patient to *you* for therapy, not to any Interpersonal."

The quiet Freudian nodded. "Unfortunately the patient left after one session."

The Oldest Member groaned and turned to the Interpersonal. "Then how did he get to you? Are you presuming to claim that he's cured?"

"I didn't know he was permanently cured," said the Interpersonal, stirring Vegetable Vice soup to see what would come up. "It's probably a long story."

"I don't want to hear it. Especially in public."

"Are we public? Isn't one point of these lunches that by keeping ourselves and our patients anonymous, we can discuss issues which may teach us a few things?" said the Interpersonal.

"This patient is no longer anonymous," said the Oldest Member severely. "Our token psychiatric resident here has not yet learned the rules."

"Forgive me," said the Youngest, "but I got excited when I ran into him on the way here, and he seemed so healthy and happy, after being so strangely psychotic in the Intensive Care Unit last year when I was a medical student there. He said he hadn't hallucinated for six months."

"Since his consultation with me?" said the Interpersonal as she fished up a particularly phallic vegetable of undiagnosable species and vintage.

"Yes."

"Flummery," muttered the Oldest Member, who had not been able

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to find anything in his soup except peas.

"I'd like to hear about the case," said another Pshrink. "I didn't even catch the name, and if I did, I'll keep it to myself."

Several other Pshrinks spoke at once, saying they wanted to hear about quick cures for hallucinations.

"I remember," said the Interpersonal, "that he was quite a loner, with no family to keep tabs on him. The case is really quite odd, I suspect; and perhaps those of us who saw him, however briefly, can put things together and figure out why I did cure him, if I did." She paused and frowned. "Come to think of it, I think I can guess *how* I cured him. It's the *why* I'd like to know more about. And the more I think about it, the cure is not as mysterious as the psychiatric disorder itself. I'd like very much to hear about the encounters other Pshrinks had with him."

As everyone else murmured in agreement, the Oldest Member snorted and tugged at his moustache.

"Careful," said the Interpersonal. "You're spoiling the waxed tips."

"Oh, go ahead and indulge yourself," he said finally. "Tell us the story."

"But it's *our* story, all four of us. Let's begin with the Youngest Member's description of—we'll call him Mr. X—in the ICU."

"Okay," said the Youngest, sitting upright and composing his face, as young doctors learn to do when they are reporting on cases to older and ostensibly wiser colleagues. "Mr. X was admitted to the ICU by his internist, who had diagnosed a dangerous cardiac arrhythmia requiring the implantation of a pacemaker. Mr. X is an elderly male—"

"Elderly my foot!" roared the Oldest Member. "He's not even sixty! He's in early middle age!"

"You must forgive the young," said the Interpersonal. "To them anyone over forty is a geriatrics problem."

"Sorry," said the Youngest, with no visible signs of contrition. "Anyway, Mr. X was, except for his irregular heartbeat, in reasonably good health considering the injuries he had sustained in World War Two, as well as the fact that he was—er—in early middle age."

"What were the injuries?" asked the quiet Freudian, who had obviously never asked the patient.

"He'd had a head injury, with some loss of hearing and a small piece of shrapnel buried in his skull. The hearing loss had been correctable with a hearing aid; and since the shrapnel was minute and didn't seem to cause any trouble, no one thought it necessary to remove it."

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"Mr. X told me he didn't know of any electro-encephalographic abnormalities," said the Interpersonal. "Were there any?"

"None," said the Youngest, "and that was one of the first things the house staff tested when he began to have such peculiar hallucinations. He was on a disabled veteran's partial pension for the head wound and of course the leg that was amputated when a land mine blew up near him; but he'd managed quite well physically until he got a new job, an advancement that produced so much nervous tension he began to have palpitations that eventually became serious."

"Tension? Or arteriosclerosis?" said the Oldest Member, who was still scowling.

"As far as anyone could tell, tension," said the Youngest Member. "They even did a cardiac catheterization but no evidence of structural abnormality or arteriosclerosis could be found. The cardiologists decided that a pacemaker would protect him from any dire results of the arrhythmia."

"Didn't they consider tranquilizers first?" asked an Eclectic.

"Oh, sure. I forgot. Lots of tranquilizers and visits to a few therapists had been tried before he went to the hospital. The heart went on acting up, so the pacemaker went in."

"And that's when he became psychotic?" asked the Oldest Member.

"Yes."

"Right away?" asked the Interpersonal.

"No. That was the odd thing. As you know, it's not uncommon for patients who are hooked up to a lot of machinery while seriously ill to have episodes of depersonalization or even hallucinations—in the Coronary Care Unit, or on renal dialysis, or in the ICU. I guess patients with tubes in every orifice and machinery clicking around them, monitoring everything their bodies are doing, have a right to feel they've lost touch with their own humanness."

"Nicely put," said the Interpersonal, smiling at the Youngest.

"Thanks. Mr. X had been hooked up to cardiac monitors and intravenous equipment and the other paraphernalia, but while in bed he was doing just fine mentally. I paid a lot of attention to him because he was so normal compared to a lot of the other patients. Then came the day he was ready to leave the hospital because the pacemaker was working well, and he got dressed and suddenly began to hallucinate."

"Didn't want to leave, I suppose," said a Pshrink who still worked in hospitals because she was addicted to them.

"I don't know," said the Youngest, looking uncomfortable.

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"What were the hallucinations at that time?" asked the Oldest Member, who now had that Avidly Listening Pshrink look on his face.

"He began talking about people who seemed to be inside his head, along with vivid pictures that were like a combination of hieroglyphics and bird tracks marching across in straight lines, blotting out and reappearing in different combinations."

"He *saw* the people?"

"No, he heard them. Or maybe he didn't. It wasn't something he could explain easily. He kept talking about what these people were doing, which kept changing. One of them had a guttural name—I'll say 'Ugh' although that wasn't it—and the other two had pleasant names I can't remember since they weren't very pronounceable. I'll call them A and B. It seems that Ugh had it in for A and B and kept chasing them, with intent to kill."

"Oedipal hallucinations would bother anyone," said the Oldest Member, with the placidity of one who feels he is on safe ground.

"But it wasn't A or B or what Ugh was going to do to them that bothered Mr. X," said the Youngest. "While he was hallucinating he kept shouting that he couldn't stand the changes. No one knew what he meant until later when he explained it a little to me."

"Why did you let him out of the hospital?" said a Pshrink.

"We didn't. The house staff gave him a sedative and he fell asleep almost standing up. He went on mumbling about A and B in his sleep until we got his clothes off and put him back in bed. He woke up the next day remembering the hallucinations but not experiencing them. He felt great and insisted on signing out of the hospital. Then when he got dressed and was leaving the ward, he began to hallucinate again. That scared him, so he agreed to stay for a psychiatric consultation.

"Days passed, and he didn't hallucinate again, so the psychiatric consultant and the medical staff decided to try discharging him on the condition that he would immediately go to see a psychiatrist. He got dressed and I noticed that he was quite pale. He denied that he was hallucinating, but I'm sure he was."

"You are correct," said the Oldest Member, brushing a crumb of Rationalized Roll off his tweed lapel. "He *was* hallucinating and as soon as he was back in his apartment he called the name he'd been given—mine. I had a cancellation later that afternoon, so I saw him. The hallucinations had stopped, but he was worried. I thought he should go into long-term analysis, and at first he agreed. Since I always try to do at least two consultations before making a definitive

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referral, we made another appointment for the next day. He cancelled it."

"Then that's all you saw of him?" said the Interpersonal.

"No, a week later he came for another consultation, this time saying he wanted a referral. I was too busy to fit him into my schedule permanently, so I sent him to one of my colleagues who is interested in the analytic treatment of psychotics. Although Mr. X didn't seem terribly psychotic, there were the undeniable hallucinations which he said occurred every day for at least a couple of hours. He had not told anyone about them, and apparently even his internist thought that he'd had only a momentary mental aberration while still in the hospital. Mr. X's physical condition was good, the pacemaker working perfectly when it had to, which was seldom."

"Seldom?" asked the Youngest Member. "Why?"

"Because Mr. X's illness had changed his attitude towards his job," said the Oldest Member. "The arrhythmia accordingly quieted down when his psyche did."

"What job?" asked a Pshrink.

"If I remember correctly, he's a top editor of textbooks at some publishing house—"

"Turgid textbooks," said the Interpersonal.

"—and Mr. X said the silliness of the hallucinations somehow made his job seem easier. The ceaseless, changing, and basically boringly banal adventures of A and B pursued by Ugh were enough to make him relax at work. He wanted a referral for therapy only because he was embarrassed by the hallucinations and wanted to get rid of them."

"And I was embarrassed," said the quiet Freudian, a small, thin man, "by Mr. X's failure to come back after only one session so I didn't call you up [he glanced apologetically at the O.M.] and find out more about his hallucinations. You see, he came only because he'd found my name in his appointment book. He couldn't remember having made the appointment, and he couldn't remember seeing you."

"That's bizarre," said the Oldest Member. "I know that he had neatly circumscribed times when he hallucinated, but he remembered them perfectly well when I saw him."

"He must have had a fugue state," said the quiet Freudian, "complete with total amnesia for the psychosis. I forgot to mention that in addition to finding my name, he found a collection of scribbled sheets of paper upon which he'd also written my name and telephone number. Most of the sheets—which I saw—were covered with un-

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decipherable gibberish in an unknown language."

"Bird tracks and hieroglyphics?" asked the Youngest.

"Something like that. What interested me was that he'd written in the margins, in clear, readable English, critical expressions like 'trite, lousy style, what trash'—the sort of remarks a very angry professional editor might put on a manuscript."

"What happened to the manuscript?" asked the Interpersonal eagerly.

"He handed it to me and asked me to destroy it. I think he believed that if I did so, the hallucinations would not come back. I do not ordinarily pander to neurotic impulses of neurotic patients, much less give in to psychotics, but I found myself walking out into the hall with Mr. X. He watched while I threw the thing into the incinerator. He thanked me and said he didn't need a pshrink anymore. Then he paid in cash and left. That was last October."

"Early October?" asked an Eclectic.

"I think so. Why do you ask?"

"Because late in October his internist sent him to me for a psychiatric consultation," said the Eclectic.

"Five of us!" said the Oldest Member. "Mr. X actually saw five of us Pshrinks—without remembering the previous episodes of hallucinations?"

"When I saw him," said the Eclectic, "he said he had begun to hallucinate for the first time, and told his internist about it. He knew, of course, that he'd had some sort of psychological upset while in the hospital to get his pacemaker—that was on the records—but he'd forgotten about the other times he'd seen pshrinks, because I didn't get that history until I listened to the rest of you today."

"Was he frightened?" said the Interpersonal matter-of-factly.

"I thought it was odd that he wasn't. He seemed bored and disgusted with the hallucinations. He said it was like having to read a particularly hackneyed B novel over and over; and he felt ashamed that his own imagination, which he assumed was somehow producing the hallucinations, was so sadly disorganized, banal, and dull. He prided himself, he said, on being a skillful editor and knowing good writing; but he had no control over the story going on in his head. I recommended antipsychotic medication but Mr. X refused and left. I never saw him again."

"But I did," said one of the Adlerians who had not spoken before but had listened to the others with an expression of astonishment. "I knew him slightly at college, and that may have been why he called me—probably not long after he'd seen our esteemed Eclectic

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here. He said he was having strange hallucinations for two hours every day, couldn't remember having them before, and had decided to ask me what to do about them because he was afraid to tell his internist. I agreed to have a late lunch with him—I didn't want to be his therapist—and we talked about it at length. He seemed perfectly sane, his heart was doing well, he was happy in his job, and he was even becoming more social, which was another reason the hallucinations embarrassed him. I thought that perhaps they were the sort of hypnagogic hallucinations that occur sometimes in normal people when they are sleepy, but I changed my mind when Mr. X began to hallucinate right in my presence, in the restaurant."

"What were the hallucinations?" asked the Interpersonal.

"It sounded as if he were making up a story as he went along, a silly plot about a villain and a hero and a heroine, although I'm not that sure about the sexes and I couldn't make out the setting or the exact ramifications of the plot because he'd keep changing them. The villain did sound like 'Ugh,' and I think Mr. X was hung up on whether or not Ugh should attack a planet with a stolen spaceship with B in it. Or was it A?"

The Oldest Member shoved aside the remains of the lasagna he had been picking at, and said, "Are you telling me that this textbook editor writes or edits science fiction on the sly, or that he did?"

"No" said the Adlerian. "I asked him that. He said he never read fiction if he could help it, except revered old classics, preferably Russian. He disapproved of science fiction and was terribly upset that he seemed to be making up not only SF but *bad* SF in his head."

The Interpersonal giggled.

The Adlerian nodded to her and said, "I gave him your name—he wrote it down—because I thought someone versed in SF might tune into his problems better. He thanked me and we finished lunch."

"With Mr. X hallucinating all through dessert?" said the Oldest Member.

"Yes, but quietly, as if he were faintly amused by it. I was flabbergasted by what happened next. As we walked together out of the restaurant, he suddenly turned to me and said, "Why, Joe! Haven't seen you in ages! How are you? Have you already had lunch?"

"Do you mean to say that X had absolutely no memory of calling you, having lunch with you, hallucinating to beat the band?" said the Oldest Member.

"That's right. I gently asked him about the hallucinations and he stared at me as if I were crazy. I pretended to be joking and he walked off, presumably still carrying in his pocket the piece of paper

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with the referral on it."

"Well," said the Oldest Member to the Interpersonal. "Now it's your turn. You finish this case history or I may get indigestion and sue the club."

"I'll do my best," said the Interpersonal, who had eaten all her portion of liver lasagna because she thought it was good for her. "Mr. X called me sometime in November, I think it was. He said he'd found my name on a prescription blank apparently given him by his old college buddy, whom he had not consulted—as far as he knew. He'd looked me up and found that I'm a pshrink, so he thought maybe he ought to try it, because he was having embarrassing hallucinations that had first started a week previously."

"Maybe he's lying about these supposed amnesiac episodes," said the Oldest Member.

"I don't think so," said the Interpersonal. "Of course, I didn't know about the other episodes; but he seemed genuinely puzzled about how he had acquired the paper with my name on it; and he was even more puzzled by his hallucinations, which came only at set times, usually right after lunch, and only lasted for two or three hours. In fact, Mr. X could do his own work right through the period of hallucinations if he concentrated hard enough. What disturbed and embarrassed him was that he was becoming—not frightened, but *intrigued* by them."

"What was dull had become intriguing?" said the Eclectic.

"So it seems," said the Interpersonal. "He asked me for an hour right after lunch, which I provided. He came in complaining about various aches and pains—"

"He did?" said the Adlerian. "I've just remembered that before he started to hallucinate in the restaurant, he complained a little about something aching. I think it was his head. Or maybe it was his leg."

"His teeth," said the Oldest Member. "I remember he told me that they bothered him."

"I'm sure it was his head, near the shrapnel wound," said the Eclectic.

"Gee," said the Youngest Member. "I remember now that when he was getting dressed, ready to go home, he did complain a little about some aches—and this was before the hallucinations started."

"There are many neurological conditions leading to hallucinations that have prodromal signs like mysterious pains," said the Eclectic, who had once been a neurologist.

"But it was only when he was strapping on his artificial leg that he began complaining," said the Youngest. "And I don't remember

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his having a removable dental bridge that he put in before going home. We make a record of everything removable like that."

"He definitely didn't have a removable bridge," said the Interpersonal. "He had a lot of fillings. Old fillings."

"You say that portentously," said the Oldest Member. "Is it supposed to mean something?"

"Old fillings dating from the thirties and forties frequently were put in without the base material that's now used. I've had some of the problems myself . . .".

"Hallucinations, m'dear?"

"Of course not. Toothache—from electrical resonance or whatever it is that bolluxes up the teeth and makes them ache because of those damn old fillings that have to come out."

The Oldest Member leaned forward, brows beetling. "Do you have the gall to tell us that you didn't even cure this patient with dubious interpersonal analysis? You just sent him to a dentist?"

"Not exactly. When Mr. X started to describe his hallucinations, as he was having them during the session, they were about Ugh and A and B, just as the rest of you have said, but I found them to be interesting. The characters, whoever they were, seemed fully drawn and their adventures thrilling, even elaborate. As an SF aficionado, I confess that I didn't find them trite at all. I remember thinking I wished I had a tape recorder so I'd be able to remember them later."

"And steal the plot?" asked the Oldest Member.

"Certainly not! At least, I think—I hope—but that's beside the point. While Mr. X was describing the hallucinations, I noticed that he seemed to be in pain that was more severe than the minor complaints he'd had before the hallucinations started. It was as if everything ached horribly—his thigh above the artificial leg, his head near the shrapnel wound, his ear, his teeth, the skin over his pacemaker—not, fortunately, his chest *under* the pacemaker. He said he'd gone to a dentist recently and had been told he ought to have his old fillings replaced, but he was beginning to believe that it wouldn't help because he was falling apart. What really scared him, which he wouldn't talk about at first, was his fear that the pacemaker was responsible for the aches and pains in the rest of his body, as well as what he thought were new symptoms of hallucinations."

"Then how did you cure him?" asked the Oldest Member. "Send him to his dentist? Or is the poor guy minus his pacemaker now?"

"I thought that the pacemaker ought to come out last, since that was the most essential of all the pieces of metal in or on his body."

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"But what's metal got to do with it?" asked a Pshrink.

"I thought there might be electronic complications, if I'm using the word correctly, and I'm probably not," said the Interpersonal. "Depending on the point of view of the examiner, one can say that the nervous system functions chemically—or physiologically—or psychiatrically, or whatever. But from another point of view the nervous system is an electronic marvel which might get upset by too much metal impinging on it in some way."

"Aha!" said the Oldest Member. "You told Mr. X to have the shrapnel removed. It was behaving like a radio receiver."

"Was it? I don't know. I wanted—as any pshrink would be tempted to do—to investigate the interesting psychodynamics of the hallucinations, but I thought that first he ought to have the aches and pains investigated. In fact, I decided to do a little preliminary investigating myself."

"Trust an Interpersonal to do something un-pshrinkish."

"Yes. I did the simplest thing first. I asked him to take off his hearing aid."

There was silence in the dim dining room of Pshrinks Anonymous.

"I see you are all struck dumb before my brilliance," said the Interpersonal. "After all, a hearing aid is electronic and it was the most easily removable gadget on Mr. X. He took it off and the hallucinations promptly stopped. When I asked him to put it back on, the hallucinations started again. Then he took off his artificial leg; and presto, no hallucinations. It didn't seem to matter which piece of metal he removed as long as it was something.

"He decided to go without his hearing aid until he saw his dentist. A few days later he called me to say that the new fillings were a great success. He could wear his leg and his hearing aid, and of course the pacemaker and the shrapnel, without being bothered by hallucinations. I tried to interest him in some therapy, because I thought the nature of the hallucinations warranted psychoanalytic investigation, but he refused."

"And since then he's been okay, for six months," said the Youngest. "This explains why Mr. X had the hallucinations only after he got fully dressed—and equipped—when he was ready to leave the hospital. And it must explain why he had them only during the day."

"Any true Pshrink," said the Oldest Member, "would say that if too many bits of metal can hook up electronically so as to bring out the repressed Oedipal problems in such a psychotic manner, then a proper analysis was indicated."

"I believe that, in my Interpersonal way, I've already said that,"

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said the Interpersonal. "Now, however, after hearing that he's been free of hallucinations for six months, I think all of us who've seen him should knuckle down and do some analysis ourselves. Remember that he hallucinated in a very interesting way, at specific times."

"I'm a witness," said the Adlerian, "to the fact that the hallucinations would stop abruptly with resulting total amnesia for the episode, although he was still wearing all the metal."

"He must have been putting you on," said the Oldest Member. "Didn't our Youngest Member say that Mr. X remembered the hallucinations well from one time to the next? He certainly remembered having had them when he came to see me."

"But by the time he saw me," said the quiet Freudian, "he'd forgotten them."

"And when he saw me," said the Eclectic, "he remembered having had days of hallucinations—but he didn't remember the previous episode."

"He'd hallucinate regularly for days, and then start all over again as if from scratch. Does that remind anyone of anything?" asked the Interpersonal.

"I suppose you have something weird in mind?" said the Oldest Member with a bit of a leer.

"Perhaps I have not mentioned it here," said the Interpersonal, "but many writers nowadays have sold their souls to machines which function very much like this poor patient's psychosis."

"Oh come now," said the Oldest Member. "We're not that far into the science fiction world of the future."

"I'm afraid we are," said the Interpersonal. "A word processor can be used to rewrite and rewrite endlessly, the unwanted words disappearing miraculously, the day's work stored on floppy discs which the computer uses to spew the whole thing out into the printer when that version is produced. The writer of Ugh versus A and B seemed to make many versions, elaborately rewriting each one for a week or so, and then either printing it out or starting over without printing it. Either way, Mr. X's memory of the plot would be wiped out when that version was wiped out of the word processor. Whatever was happening while he hallucinated tended to be wiped out of his memory too."

"That's a positively outrageous theory," said the Oldest Member, who could not even type, much less use a word processor. "It's obvious that Mr. X is a compulsive editor in a boring job who invented SF trash in his unconscious in order to have the dubious pleasure of editing it in his conscious and end up feeling like a superior editor

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conquering an inferior writer."

"Hmm," said the Interpersonal. "Perhaps that's a better theory than mine. It certainly speaks deeply to my unconscious."

"Very funny," said the Oldest Member. "You were probably going to speculate irrationally about the various metal objects in and on Mr. X's body forming with his nervous system an unusual electronic field capable of tuning into word processors being used someplace else."

"That's a perfectly possible theory," said one of the older Pshrinks. "I'm not supposed to go near microwave ovens or garage doors that are activated by remote control devices. They futz up my own pacemaker."

"Nothing went wrong with Mr. X's pacemaker," said the Youngest Member.

"It was probably the last link that created the field," said the Interpersonal.

"There! You see! She's off and running with her own theory now that you've given her the chance," said the Oldest Member.

The Youngest hurriedly passed the largest helping of the newly arrived dessert, Freudian Fig Fling, to the Oldest Member.

The Interpersonal was muttering quietly to herself. "Endless revisions. Probably requested. Lines marching across the screen, disappearing and reforming. Oh, the agony."

"Well, I do think there's a point to this word processor theory," said the Youngest Member bravely, now that the Oldest was immersed in figs. "It must have been a very strange word processor, not in English, but in some unknown language like bird tracks and mysterious hieroglyphics, a language that when used in the machine could create the whole story—like a film—inside the head of anyone tied into the field."

The Oldest Member began turning purple and chewing rapidly.

"Colleagues," said the Interpersonal gravely. "Consider the possibilities. We humans are not alone in the universe. Somewhere out there are writers working on the equivalent of word processors."

"Hard-working writers," said a Pshrink who was trying to be one.

"Writers who have to revise and revise," said a Ph.D. Pshrink who had taken twenty years to write his thesis and felt superior to the M.D. Pshrinks who had never written any.

"Writers who drive editors berserk," said another who held tenaciously to his position as editor of one of the leading psychoanalytic journals.

The Youngest Member grinned at the Interpersonal and said, "I

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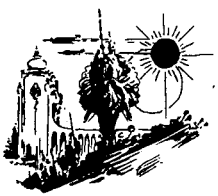
wish Mr. X hadn't had his fillings replaced. It sounds as if the story was turning out to be good after all."

The Oldest Member swallowed and said, "Listen here! There are *no* alien word-processors and there are *no* fantastic, alien writers."

"Oh?" said the Interpersonal. "I think I even know a few." ●



IAsfm Puzzle #5

(from page 18)

MEN OF LETTERS

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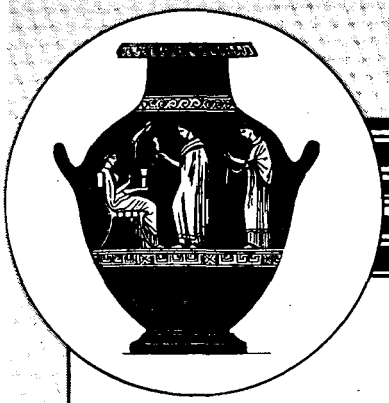

LOREN EISELEY'S TIME PASSAGES

In all the strange and candid portraits
his eyes looked tired and edged
haunted with lines
that belong in cartographers' dreams

Behind the eyeglasses was the glass
and beyond that the gelid
landscape of the retina
they were his intuition

Yet Eiseley's sight resided in his hands
much like a dolphin's
is housed in the catacomb of its skull
they were his vision

Having held Archaeopteryx once
he felt the alignment the DNA weave
turned by muscle fiber and feather
time ran through his blood

Astronomer of the bone
and the pot sherd and the fossil
his fists were our first time machine
they opened and with them our most ancient history

—Robert Frazier

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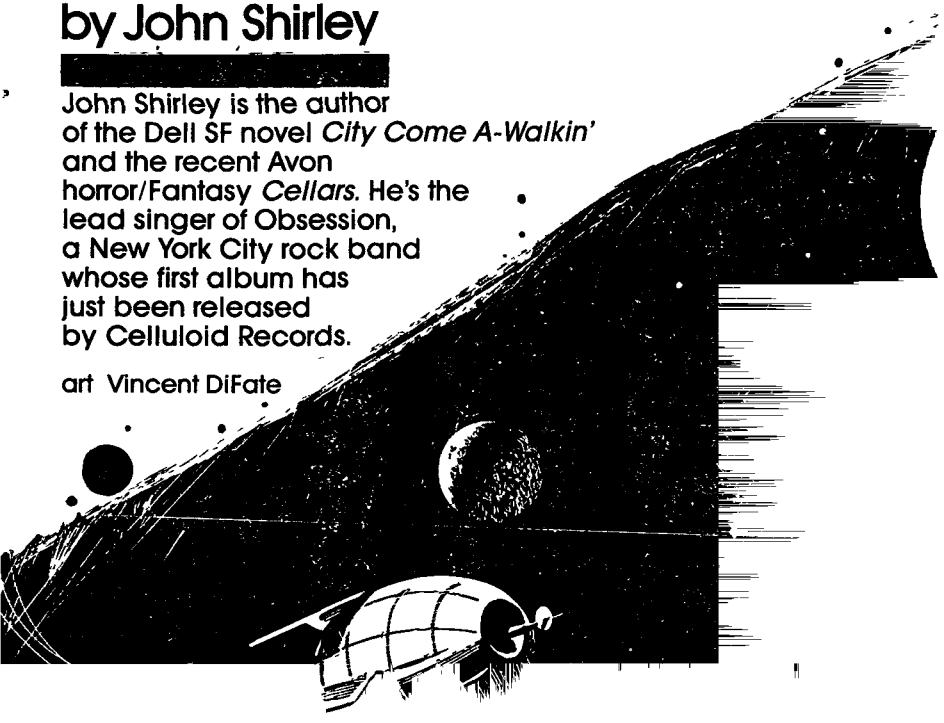
QUILL TRIPSTICKLER HITS BOTTIM

by John Shirley

John Shirley is the author of the Dell SF novel *City Come A-Walkin'* and the recent Avon horror/Fantasy *Cellars*. He's the lead singer of Obsession, a New York City rock band whose first album has just been released by Celluloid Records.

art Vincent DiFate



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"Three months, Fives. Three months confined to that rattletrap ship with *you*—a robot who seems to pride himself on insolence—and three months of those palate-insulting synthetic meals . . . for *this*!" Quill Tripstickler gestured in despair at the low, boggy yellow hills of the planet Bottim's only continent, Spoo. The hills below the ridge on which their spaceship stood were featureless but for a scattering of squat greystone warehouses.

Bottim's atmosphere was wretched to look upon and wretched to inhale. It resembled a vast goldfish bowl badly in need of cleaning. Great streaks of sludgy gray-brown mingled with billows of sulphurous yellow to wrap the noonday sky with malodorous stickiness.

"Three months, Fives. And what's worse, I'm very much afraid that lowlife scoundrel Scomley may have arrived before us."

"Oh, he has indeed, sir. And he no doubt considers *you* a 'lowlife scoundrel,' as these assessments *are* relative—begging your pardon, sir—" said Fives. Fives was Quill's robot butler and factotum—officially. In fact, from the waist up, he *looked* like the stereotype of a 20th-century British gentleman's gentleman, with his bowler hat, his coat-and-tails, his woolen vest, his bumbershoot, and his realistic Plastiflex face and apparently human brown eyes. He wore nothing below the waist, for there he tapered to a single black-rubber spherical wheel.

"Are you defending that blackguard, Fives? Scomley calls himself a tourist agent! He was cribbing from my screen when we were in the agent's academy together, and now he's burglarized my datacenter. If we don't stop him, he'll steal my claim to open up touristry on Bottim!" Quill's already oversized nose seemed to swell with indignation as he drew himself up to declare in ringing tones, "But Quill Tripstickler and Tripstickler alone will claim the commission for Bottim! Quill Tripstickler, the man who will gather the planetary flowers of the galaxy into a shining bouquet—"

And Quill was off on one of his extemporaneous monologues of self-praise, striking pose after statuesque pose near the tailfin of their pineapple-shaped starship (a used ship on loan from the agency's New Hawaii tours). In these orations Quill described himself as a figure larger than life, a man of heroic proportions, a forger of legends. He was not entirely inaccurate: his nose was larger than life, and his ears were of heroic proportions. His small eyes, thin brown hair, extraordinarily long neck, bobbly adam's apple, weak chin, and spindly frame *were* in fact part of a legend; he had become legendary for a talent with women that completely

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contradicted his looks. "Quill Tripstickler," he went on reverently, "how the name trips from the tongue, reverberating with the very music of aristocracy! Scomley? Bah! Bottim belongs to *Quill Tripstickler, Galactic Trailblazer!*"

"*Tourist Agent apprentice fourth class* is, I believe, the proper title, sir," said Fives, pretending to cough behind his hand.

"Stop that spurious coughing, Fives. Enough of your programmed 'charming personality attributes.' You don't cough; you're a robot. If you want to seem human, go into the ship and put on your legs. This business of going about on a wheel is *gauche*. But no coughing."

"Very good, sir. No coughing." And, rather noisily, he sneezed.

Quill sighed. "The air here is bad enough to make a robot sneeze. It seems impossible that this dreary planet could be the place they spoke of in The Worm*. It was Screw Mouth who mentioned it first, as I recall: 'The Rite of Nubile Prancers on the lost planet Bottim.' It's *got* to be here, Fives. We can't have searched for so long for nothing. I can *feel* that this is the right planet—the infallible Tripstickler instinct at work! My confidence resurges, Fives, and if I'm wrong, may the very Heavens defecate on me. *Umph!*"

"*Umph*,, sir?" said Fives. He turned to see that some great soggy amorphous body had dropped from the very Heavens atop Quill, covering him completely.

Where Quill had been was now a dirty-blue mass of pasty protein, about three meters across: a living, palpitating collection of oozing globules quivering as Quill struggled to escape it.

"Dear, Dear," Fives murmured. "It appears Master Quill has allowed himself to be eaten. How very *gauche*." He did not roll immediately to the rescue, cognizant of the possibility that the blue blob might have an appetite for creatures of metal and plastic as well as flesh.

"*Mmph-phumph!*" Quill called, from within the pulsating mass.

"*Mmph-phumph,* sir?" Fives replied inquiringly. It was then that the blue blob detached from Quill and rolled to one side. It began to change shape, faster than the eye could follow, until it took on recognizable human form. It became, however outsized, the spitting three-dee image of Quill's stern, jutting-jawed, iron-eyed father (though tinged a telltale blue). Quill was on his knees and gasping as he recovered, unsullied but badly shaken. He

**"The Worm" is short for "The Worm in the Galaxy's Core," a popular inn for professional star travelers.*

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turned pale and backed up—still on his hands and knees as he scrambled rearward—when he saw what appeared to be his father looming over him and pointing accusingly with a ramrod-straight finger. "Bumbler!" thundered the semblance of Quill's father. "Do something properly for once!"

And then Father Tripstickler began to melt, to flow, to change, becoming the three-dimensional image of Quill's archrival, Tourist Agent Apprentice Fourth Class Scomley: a thick, bullish man with long hairy arms oddly contrasted by an angelic face and curly golden hair. "You're second-rate, Tripstickler," he said in his smooth baritone. "Throw in the towel. Give up the ship. Roll over and play dead." At this, Quill bridled. He stood, sucking in his paunch and drawing his sidearm. Rubied light flared from the needler, neatly slicing off "Scomley's" head. The stump of the neck did not bleed; the body remained standing; the severed head bounced and rolled to Quill's feet where it blinked and looked up at him. The lips twitched, and spoke: "I repeat, Tripstickler: You're *second-rate!*"

And then, as Quill backed away, the body collapsed into itself, falling to absorb the semblance of Scomley's head. It became again the amorphous blue blob and rolled away, making repulsive squelching noises as it went. It began to bounce, higher and higher, farther and farther, and was soon gone from sight.

"You didn't warn me about *that*, Fives."

"I had no notion of the thing, Master Quill." Fives rolled forward to tidy Quill's rumpled uniform. "A dreadful, rude sort of thing. But you seem no worse for wear."

"I had the most peculiar sensation when it descended on me—I felt it was *kissing* me." He shuddered. "Disgusting."

"Kissing you? Indeed yes, sir: disgusting."

"Your impertinence is tiresome, Fives. Go and ready the hovercar. We'll fly to meet the natives, and on the way we may accidentally see the Rite of Nubile Prancers in progress—ah, what does it look like?"

"I am not sure, sir. It is said that once a month more than a hundred thousand lovely nude women prance in a great westering herd across the rolling plains of Spoo: a sight to enrapture tourists indeed. But from what little we know of the Bottimians, they are not of a temperament easily adjusted to tourism. In fact, I would venture to guess that your task is likely to prove well-nigh impossible."

"Fives! When will you learn that nothing is impossible for Quill

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Tripstickler? I was created to undertake the impossible! Before you stands the flower of destiny."

"Very good, sir." said Fives noncommittally.

" 'Very good, sir!' Really, Fives, this quasi-British butler talk Father's programmed into you is redundant and annoying. Haven't you got some other dialect on tap? Perhaps something more interesting from the 20th century? How about an American argot circa, ah—1982?"

"Yo, whus happen', Quill, my man," said the robot with the austere, brown-eyed butler's face. "Get *down* on it!"

"Ah, well, at least it's variety. Break out the hovercar, Fives."

"All *right*, what it *is*, I'm splittin', my man, checkidout—"

"Fives? Forget it. Back to normal speech. Please."

"Very good, sir." Fives rolled up the ramp into the pineapple-shaped starship.

Inside he paused by the communicator, glanced over his shoulder—to be perfectly accurate, he rotated his head 180 degrees so that he stared backward over his spine. Quill was evidently remaining outside. Excellent.

Fives tapped the communicator's keyboards and punched coordinates to signal a similar device on a similar spaceship. The screen fluttered with light; an image took shape.

"Mr. Scomley?" Fives inquired in a whisper.

"This is Scomley. So you've finally decided to come to terms, eh, Fives?"

"I have, sir. You have succeeded in finding Bottim, despite our best efforts to conceal our goal from you. There seems little hope that we can conceal the prize itself—hence, I will serve him whom it profits me most to serve. Since you offer me a greater reward—freedom and cash—than Master Quill would provide, I accede to your terms. I am your cat's-paw, sir. Your chameleon undercover, your footpad, your skulking—"

"Yes, yes, enough . . . So it's true what they say about robots."

"Indeed?" Fives arched an eyebrow. "And what is that, sir?"

"That they are self-serving, venal, and only superficially loyal; that they act counter to their programming when it profits them. In short, that they are as innately vile as humanity itself. Welcome to the fold, Fives."

"Just as you like, sir. I will signal you on frequency 6744.89 when we are in sight of the prize; shortly thereafter I'll render Master Quill helpless, and you will do as you please with him, always remembering who assisted you."

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"You've got a deal, Fives, old boy. I await your signal." He cut the transmission.

"Fives!" Quill called from outside the ship. "What's the infernal delay? Ready the hovercar for flight!"

Though there was no one around to hear him, and though theoretically robots express feelings only for the sake of humans in listening distance, Fives gave a long, sad sigh.

They climbed from the car-sized, cup-shaped hovercar atop the flat black-tar roof of what appeared to be a factory. As far as could be seen in every direction rose angular black-metal towers, columnar tanks, metal stairways, soot-caked chimneys and vents hissing jets of blue flame. The air was nearly unbreathable. Quill wheezed, his eyes watering. The sun was dim, the sky in perpetual twilight.

The vast Bottimian industrial complex covered half the continent; the living quarters were jammed into unpleasant corners of the factories. Below, the narrow utility avenues between the factories were lifeless or moved only with drays carrying raw materials. There was a perpetual, jeering clamor: clacking, grinding, humming.

"Depressing scene," said Quill. "Well, best take some notes for the tourist information pamphlets. Ah, take this down, Fives: '. . . the reserved grandeur of Bottim's impressively vast industrial park is matched only by the subtle hues the discerning eye finds in its fascinatingly discolored atmosphere; a marvel of efficiency and reductionistic design, the industrial park teems with delights for the sightseer.' Embellish that, if you like, with further lies, Fives. Ah, um—best give me some historical background so we can work it into the pamphlet. Or so we can properly distort it."

"Very good, sir. What you see is the result of three centuries of single-minded toil. Bottim was once a paradisial planet, green and fragrant. The Bottimians are the quite human descendants of exiles from Earth, men and women found guilty of criminal industrial pollution. Bottim was at one time a major industrial power, an exporter of finely wrought goods of all sorts, but specializing in household appliances which people had no *real* use for. For example, aura burnishers, dust recyclers, devices for cleaning dirt from *under* wallpaper, cuff-link polishers, and musical tissue dispensers. Here, industrial emission-cleansing was perceived as a crippling extra expense. In consequence, the air became polluted with a peculiar combination of industrial gases

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that induce a subtle form of brain-damage in the longterm Bottimian inhabitant."

"What! The air I'm breathing is poisonous?"

"The poisons take years to affect one, master Quill."

"Oh, it's easy for *you* to be blasé about it, Fives. You don't breathe at *all*." Quill took a respirator from the belt of his Type Ninety-four Acme explorer's uniform, strapped it on, and said, "Get on with it, Fives."

"The Bottimians are said to be captious and unpredictable, as a side-effect of the tainting of their air. Worse, they are paranoically fanatic in the pursuit of their philosophy. The few rather rough-hewn structures we saw outside the industrial park are EMA repositories. EMA stands for Exquisitely Mysterious Artifact. The Bottimians devote their whole lives to squandering the last of their planetary resources and living on synthetic food, to facilitate the manufacture and storage of EMAs. They export none of them. EMAs are devices that look as if they would have a function—they light up and hum or smoke or whirl a bit—but in fact do nothing useful or interesting at all. The Bottimians are atheists, yet they have a life philosophy: Man was meant to manufacture artifacts; this is Man's highest state of being. And if we give the artifacts functions, we cease to appreciate them *in themselves*. EMAs are—by decree of the Bottimian Board of Directors—not even interesting to look upon. The Bottimians have made millions of tons of them."

"How very annoying."

"Precisely, sir."

"However, take a note for the travel folders: ' . . . involved in a Zen-like tribal philosophy based on the creation of *objets d'art,* the charming Bottimians—' "

"—are approaching, sir."

"What? Oh!" Quill turned to stare at the four pallid men approaching, each one afflicted with eczema and wearing a gray jumpsuit. They were pushing aluminum-handled brooms, and behind them came two men and a woman, almost identical to the men, pushing waste-collection wheelbarrels. Quill marveled at the use of manual labor for something a robot might have done more efficiently, until he realized that the Bottimians would look on the use of machinery not directly involved in the creation of Exquisitely Mysterious Artifacts as an insult to their way of life.

His speculation on Bottimian customs was cut short when one of the burlier broom jockeys walked briskly up, lifted the squirming Tripstickler by the collar, and peremptorily tossed him into

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a waste-bin, where he sprawled on his back in a heap of dusty scrap.

"Can you give cause," said the man in Standard Galactic, "why you should not be regarded as Rubbish? In what way do you contribute to the creation of Exquisitely Mysterious Artifacts?"

"I can hardly be considered *rubbish*," said Quill in chill outrage, "I am a Tripstickler!" He attempted to climb out of the waste-bin and was thrust back down amidst the debris. "I—see here, I lead a perfectly useful life: I am a Galactic Tourist Agent."

"I would counsel against naming that profession as an example of your usefulness, Master Quill," Fives said. "On *any* planet."

"And what is *this?*" said the Bottimian woman in a grating voice. "A machine that contributes nothing to the creation of EMAs? It's Rubbish!"

The Bottimian custodians advanced menacingly on Fives. Fives rolled backward, asking quickly, "Pray tell me, madame, what becomes of those classified as Rubbish?"

"They are taken to the incinerator, naturally," she said, as if it should have been obvious to the meanest intelligence. Two of the larger custodians seized Fives by the arms.

Just then Quill cried out, pointing to the west.

Bouncing across the rooftops, leaping forty meters at a bound and coming directly at them, was one of the blue blobs . . .

"An extractor!" squealed the custodians with almost rehearsed simultaneity. They let go of Fives and began to run, abandoning their tools. Before they had quite reached the fire escape at the edge of the roof, the ball of amorphous blue paste, nearly eight meters in diameter (but not so dense as it looked, and not at all heavy) descended on them with a soggy impact noise that made Quill wince. He climbed from the bin, scowling over his soiled uniform, as the Bottimians struggled to escape the extractor.

In a moment, the extractor had finished with them; it oozed to one side and began to change shape. The custodians were left on their hands and knees, blinking dazedly.

When they recovered sufficiently to look again at the extractor, they screamed (this time rather like a barbershop quartet) as a man terrified of snakes screams when he's pushed into a pit filled with cobras. For the extractor had broken up into a dozen small forms which whizzed merrily about the rooftop collecting loose lumps of roof-tar, cleaning away scraps of paper . . . Except for the telltale tinge of blue, each segment of the extractor closely resembled a cybernetic cleaning device. A useful machine.

Horrified, the custodians began chasing the mock-cleaning de-

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vices, kicking at them hysterically, their faces red, their eyes tearful, caught up in some powerful gut-reaction to what their conditioning had forbidden them.

While the custodians were distracted, Quill and Fives discreetly retreated to their hovercar and took to the air.

Coughing as they flew through a toxic plume from a smokestack, Quill said, "What do you suppose that nasty blue thing is, Fives?"

"I can only hypothesize, master Quill: It is a pest."

"I can see that, dammit!"

"I mean, sir, pest as in 'pestilence.' A by-product of the local squalor gotten out of hand. A parasite, I would guess, which psychically extracts information from the minds of those it surrounds. It looks for imagery with potent psychological associations. Then it recreates the imagery as realistically as possible, so to elicit a reaction from the victim. When you react emotionally, you give off a burst of biofield energy. Probably it absorbs this energy, and so nourishes itself."

"It may well have saved our hides."

"If you'll forgive me, sir, I'd appreciate it if you didn't use the term 'saved our hides' as inclusive of *me*. I haven't *got* a hide, strictly speaking, and the prospect of having one is nauseating."

"Nonsense! Robots can't be *nauseated!*"

Fives looked at Quill musingly, wondering if he should voice the obvious reply. Shrugging, he decided in favor of prudent silence.

"What's that, Fives?" Quill pointed to the southeast. Five-hundred meters below, a procession wound into the tired yellow hills from the outskirts of the industrial park. They corrected course to fly toward it. "Go to stationary hovering, Fives, then focus on them and part your coat for me."

"Very well, Master Quill," Fives replied, with an almost inaudible sigh.

They hung motionless, high over the fragmented thread of men filing through the passes between the warehouses on the low hills.

The procession's details were obscured by distance, and Quill dared not move closer. But Fives, gazing down on them, adjusted the long-range lenses in his eyes, registering the image on his miniature video monitors, using special filters to compensate for the murky air. Quill stood behind him and stared expectantly at his back. Fives' coat-and-tails parted precisely in the center, drawing aside in the manner of old-fashioned theatre curtains. Un-

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derneath, in the small of his back, a small video screen glowed with a close-up shot of the Bottimian procession.

Fives' bowler hat rose eerily from his head, like a flying saucer taking off, and spun purposefully down toward the procession. When it had dropped to within twenty meters of the ground, it came to a stop and hovered unnoticed in the air, listening, transmitting to Quill what it heard.

Quill stretched and sat back on the bench in the hovercar, watching the scene shifting in the small of Fives' back and yearning for a cold glass of beer. He liked a cold beer when he watched TV.

The screen showed men in spangled leisure suits trudging across the boggy ground, sweating in the humid warmth of the late afternoon, each one with a bundle in his arms or helping someone else carry something too large for one man.

At length, they assembled in orderly rows before the low stage fronting a sprawling stone building—rather resembling a penitentiary building—which Quill guessed to be an EMA repository.

"It's my impression, Fives, that these men have some high rank."

"Correct, Master Quill. Cross-referencing my files on Bottim, I conclude that these men are 'Board-members,' Chiefs of Industry from the various sections of the Industrial Park. Note the traditional gold watches tattooed on each man's right wrist. I count two-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-four of them. They are probably bringing sample EMAs for approval."

"Turn up the volume, Fives."

On the stage was a fiberboard mock-up of a limousine, and standing on the hood was a man Quill took to be the EMA judge. He wore only mauve boxer shorts, men's hosiery garters, socks, and horn-rim frames without the lenses in them. He shouted, "The rules are unchanged: The Exquisitely Mysterious Artifact must be visibly functional without being useful. If you fail the inspection, you will suffer the penalty. If you succeed, you will be rewarded as usual. Anyone who wishes to withdraw from the contest may do so now and suffer no punishment." No one lost his nerve. "Vice President Dwiggins of Dwigco Limited, step forward!"

A man carrying a cardboard box climbed the steps to the stage. From the box he took a shiny-black pyramid and a pebble. He set both down on the stage, and then pressed the pyramid's pointy tip. The pyramid lifted itself up on six tiny metal feet and scuttled over to the pebble. It grasped the pebble with a jointed steel

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claw—there was a gasp from the observers, who thought the EMA was about to do something useful—and carried it a distance of one meter. And set it down again. And picked it up and carried it to where it had been originally. And set it down. Paused. Picked it up again, carried it . . . set it down . . . paused . . .

There was wild applause from the assemblage.

"A quintessential Exquisitely Mysterious Artifact," said the judge. "Deposit it in the repository." Smiling humbly, the man carried the pyramid and the pebble into the shadows of the EMA warehouse. When he emerged, he stripped off his clothes except for boxer shorts (white with red flowers, if you must know), garters, and blue knee-socks. He stood to one side of the stage, facing the audience, arms clasped over his potbelly.

Next a man almost identical to the first brought forth a flat-black globe, a half-meter across, on a tripod. Immediately on being set on the stage, the globe fell apart and tumbled into irregular chunks the size of ice cubes, which immediately began crawling on tiny wheels to reassemble themselves like animate puzzle-pieces; they climbed one atop the other, jostling and fitting into place, until they'd formed two small perfect globes linked by a rod. This remained stable for two seconds, until tumbling apart and slowly reconstructing to become a box with a glowing bulge one one face.

"Halt the proceedings!" shouted the judge abruptly. The man who had brought the sample snatched it up and clutched it to his chest, licking his lips and staring pleadingly at the judge.

The judge shook his head, slowly and sadly. "It's too interesting, distractingly creative. It might be considered kinetic sculpture. Conceivably it could have entertainment value. *Not EMA*. My judgement: you are condemned to seven years in the repository, cleaning and oiling EMAs. Meals once every four days. No outside visitation. Solitary lock-up at night. Take him away." Four men in gray custodial uniforms escorted the chastened board-member into the shadows of the windowless stone warehouse. The condemned man looked once over his shoulder at the sky and whimpered. And then he was gone.

Moments later the custodians emerged carrying the failed EMA and several large mallets. They smashed it gleefully.

Hundreds of meters above, watching the TV screen in Fives' back, Quill shook his head sadly. "Get a new umpire! The judge was wrong; that machine was without entertainment value, was in fact boring and useless. The maker should have been rewarded."

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Quill watched as another board-member demonstrated a box with intricately articulated plastic faces that, when activated, moved its visible parts so that it became less and less interesting to look at as the moments passed. Acceptable EMA. A mirror that refused to reflect anything but bare patches of floor and unsoiled elbows—acceptable. A refrigerator that would not keep anything cool but what one didn't need to cool—e.g., shoes, belt buckles, hairpieces—accepted. A tape recorder that recorded only inarticulate sounds such as sneezes, throat-clearings, and the most tuneless, absent-minded humming—acceptable. A man-sized machine that recorded details of your life and then followed you about confirming what you already knew: "That is your dog, sir, his name is Farquar . . . This is your wife, Bella . . . Over here is a waste-paper disposal chute . . . You are now looking at a clock, and you have seen that it is *not* three o'clock."

The EMA inspection ceremonies went on and on, becoming painfully tedious, until well after dark. Torches were brought forth, and the tedium continued. At last, stretching out on the hovercar's bench, Quill mumbled, "I'm going to get some sleep, Fives. Wake me if they say anything about the Rite of Nubile Prancers."

Using infra-red vision, Fives watched through the night. At dawn, the ceremonies were completed, and two-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-four men were stripped down to garters, socks, and boxer shorts. They stood to the left of the stage, seeming not at all weary. In fact, they were excited, barely able to contain themselves, occasionally nudging one another and gazing into the rising sun, which lent a momentary multicolored splendor to the thick stratas of polluted air fouling the horizon.

Quill woke and stretched, complaining of stiffness, just in time to hear the EMA judge saying, " . . . prepare for the Rite of Nubile Prancers."

"That's it, Fives—go in for a close up and record this for headquarters. By Jove, we've got the drop on Scomley! Imagine it, Fives, thousands of beautiful young girls prancing across the plains! I wonder where they're going to come from? Maybe they're waiting in the warehouses—"

He leaned closer to the TV monitor as the judge called hoarsely, "Now, nubile prancers, flower of manhood, naked glory of our race—prance in praise of a life which accepts the pointlessness of living and celebrates it! Prance! Prance to your reward!"

And all two-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-four men began to skip, to hop, to prance in feeble imitation of dancing satyrs,

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moving herdlike across the rolling wastelands toward sheer emptiness. "Fives . . . this . . . *this?* For this I came millions of light years, searched planet after planet for three months in a starship shaped like a pineapple? For this! Gad, how depressing. Fives, you don't suppose there are women coming to meet them—nude women by the thousands, prancing?"

"I fear not, sir. I'm afraid that whenever one hears an interstellar rumor, one can be sure it is at least one-half inaccurate. The inaccurate half in this instance—"

"I can *see* the inaccuracy, Fives," Quill said. "Men. Worse, every one of them is overweight and mottled, with a red nose and squinty eyes . . . wearing those horn-rim glasses and shorts . . . bowlegged, remarkably clumsy. *Look* at them tripping over one another . . . that tranced look on their faces . . . the euphoria of monomania, Fives. Repulsive sight. I'm embarrassed for them."

"Just so, sir. Shocking behavior."

"Ahh! Get closer, Fives, I want to see if—it *is!* Extractors! Hundreds of them! And they're bouncing in formation!"

Indeed, orderly lines of the rubbery blue blobs were bouncing toward the naked, prancing board-members. "The board-members are going willingly, *happily*, to the extractors! Odd—they're not afraid."

"Apparently they recognize these as *domesticated* extractors, Master Quill."

The first wave of extractors ceased bouncing and began to roll; they met the wave of prancing flab head-on, and for a moment all was confused as they intermixed.

Three board-members emerged from beneath one of the pasty blue globes, which had already begun to transform.

It broke into several parts, one part transfiguring to become the likeness of a broad desk covered with telephones and at least nine cigar-boxes; a board-member in his underwear sat in the deep leather armchair and pretended to talk on two of the phones at once, now and then pausing to jam handfuls of cigars in his mouth. His eyes were wild.

Another extractor became three lady secretaries with buxom figures and wingtip glasses, notepads in hand; the board-members chased them around the desks, giggling idiotically. Another became a set of golf clubs and an obsequious caddy . . .

The hollow between two hills was crowded with hundreds of enigmatically transformed extractors and hundreds more madly gamboling middle-aged Bottimians.

"What do you make of this, Fives?"

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"I must admit I'm puzzled, sir. But I conjecture that the extractors may have drawn certain ancestral memories from the deep subconscious of the board-members, giving them the opportunity to act out their fantasies. They seem happy, but I think we may safely conclude that the Rite of Nubile Prancers is not a suitable attraction for the agency's rather reserved clientele; they would regard this as an activity in poor taste. Still, it is significant that the extractors are sometimes used to advantage. If one approaches them with positive images held fixedly in the mind—"

"Yes, yes, Fives, my own thinking exactly. We can bring droves of tourists to some remote corner of Bottim, pen up a number of domesticated extractors, council the tourists to visualize their heart's desire, and the extractors will become just that which the tourist most deeply—and secretly—wants to see. All this in private sessions, of course."

"Of course."

"Fives, we're going to get a smashing commission out of this."

"Unfortunately, Master Quill, Mr. Scomley will have reached the same conclusions. And I fear he may outspeed us to agency headquarters and make his claim on the planet first. You see, sir, he's hovering half a kilometer away. He's observed the whole thing. Therefore . . ."

"Fives! What in the name of Disneyworld, Florida, are you up to?"

The robot had reversed course. The hovercar returned to the stage of the huge repository. They landed a few meters from the empty stage. The judge had gone into the EMA repository.

"Fives, go back to the ship immediately! Damn! Scomley's here!" Scomley's hovercar set down a dozen meters to Quill's right. Scomley disembarked, and, grinning nastily (mostly to show off his perfect teeth), one hand on the pistol in his belt, he came menacingly (it seemed to Quill) toward them.

Fives turned to Quill, who was just reaching for his gun. Laying a restraining hand on Quill's wrist, Fives said, "Begging your pardon, sir, but would you mind holding my umbrella?" He held out his bumbershoot.

"What? Hold your own absurdly anachronistic umbrella, Fives!"

"Very well, sir. If you won't hold my umbrella, it's necessary that the umbrella hold *you*." With that cue, the umbrella leapt from Fives' hand, turned itself inside out and flung itself at Quill's head. Quill shouted (you *insist* on knowing? Very well, then: he shouted "Huh? *Hey!*") and stumbled back as the umbrella closed

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over his head like a rapacious sea anemone, blinding him, clinging tenaciously though he clawed to dislodge it. He staggered to and fro, the handle of the umbrella waving in the air over his head, the vanes gripping his shoulders like the pincers of a thing alive.

"Splendid, Fives!" said Scomley, sauntering up. "You keep him restrained until I'm well away, and you shall have your reward. I'm off to claim the blighted planet Bottim as a tourist attraction on the strength of the potential use of extractors."

"There is, Mr. Scomley, one obstacle. The extractors may be difficult for an offworlder to train. But the Bottimians evidently have a method of training certain of the creatures. I have communicated with the Bottimian leaders—" here he paused to move aside as Quill plunged blindly toward the sound of his voice, bellowing curses muffled by the umbrella clamping his head—"and they have informed me that the extractor training method is divulged only to qualified manufacturers of EMAs. You must become one of them, sir. How, you ask? Thus: offer them my hat. It will make the perfect EMA." Fives' hat rose spinning from his head and drifted to Scomley's outstretched hands.

"But see here, Fives, this thing *works*. It can fly, it keeps the rain off your head—"

"The Bottimians are not aware that it is functional. Tell them this: that it is a hat which refuses to be worn, and which follows you about, always just out of reach. I will see to it."

"Say no more!" Scomley crowed. Grinning, he carried the hat proudly to the stage and shouted, "Oh, Perspicacious Judge of Exquisitely Mysterious Artifacts! Make yourself known! I offer an EMA!"

From the gloomy shadows of the repository's doorway, the judge stepped into view, scowling. "How now, offworlder? You would submit an EMA? Offworlders think they're Heavy Business. Submit an EMA, and you submit also to our laws: if the device is inappropriate, you will pay the price. Do you agree?"

"Oh certainly, certainly. And now: a hat which refuses to be worn." He attempted to place the hat on his head, but it flew from his grasp and hovered nearby. "You see?"

"Here, let me see that." The judge reached for the hat, and it flew into his hands. He placed it on his head. It was too small. But it remained. "What's *this?*" he roared. "This outworlder has insulted my intelligence! He thinks he can come here and become one of us just like *that?* With a hat that *functions?* Custodians!"

Snarling angrily, Scomley reached for his pistol—the bowler hat flew from the judge's head and struck Scomley's hand, knock-

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ing the pistol to the stage. Four men seized the tourist agent, stripped him bare and dragged him into the repository, howling, as the judge shouted after him, "I condemn you to twelve years cleaning and oiling EMAs and another ten if you break anything!"

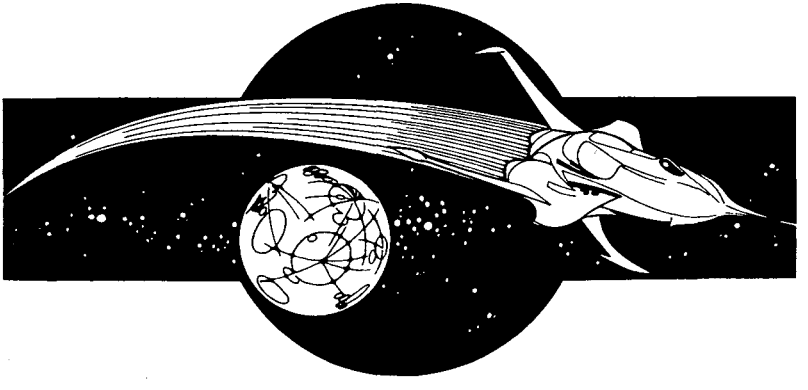
Fives' umbrella had detached itself from Quill's head. Quill walked moodily to the hovercar and sat down. Fives retrieved his umbrella and his hat and followed Quill to the hovercar.

"You didn't have to do it that way, Fives," said Quill sulkily. He sat on his bunk, watching the planet Bottim recede in the viewscreen. "You could have *told* me. We could have staged a fight or *something* more dignified than—"

"But I didn't know exactly *how* I was going to trick Mr. Scomley until the moment came to do it, sir. I made arrangements so that he should come when I called, so I could 'do him the dirty', as they once said, but I didn't know. Well, sir: I regret—"

"You regret nothing! I heard you chuckling when that umbrella got hold of me! You enjoyed the whole thing! You *adore* seeing the boss's nose tweaked!"

"Begging your pardon, sir," said Fives stiffly, "but your suggestion that I enjoyed your discomfort is entirely inaccurate and unjust. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to make some adjustments in the mechanism of the recreation room's video-cassette player." He rolled to the next room and closed the door behind him. He went to a video player and inserted a cassette that he took from beneath his coat. It was a five-minute videotape he had recorded himself. It showed Quill staggering about with the umbrella on his head, blinded and foolish. Fives played the tape over and over, all the time barely able to control his giggling. ●



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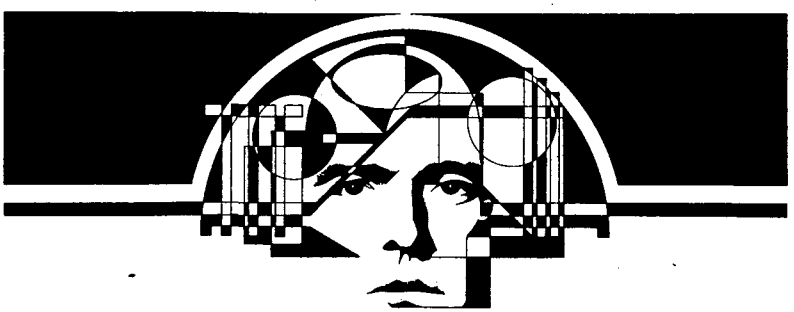
(from page 71)

SECOND SOLUTION TO PIGGY'S GLASSES AND THE MOON



A moon that rises, just after the sun sets, is on the opposite side of the earth from the sun. It must, therefore, be a full moon, not the thin crescent that Golding describes in the first sentence of the quoted paragraph.

Barry Singer, a psychologist at California State University, at Long Beach, likes to give his students a test to bring out how poor a guide intuition is in answering even the simplest scientific questions. One of his test questions is: "From what direction or directions does the moon appear to rise in the sky?" He discovered that very few students answered correctly.

Singer speaks of this in a paper "To Believe or Not Believe" that can be found in a book I highly recommend, *Science and the Paranormal.* It is an anthology edited by Singer and the astronomer George Abell and published last year by Scribner's. Only a small number of people, writes Singer, are aware of the fact that the moon, like the sun and the stars, always rises in the east. "Many people, probably because they occasionally discern a faint image of the moon during the daytime, believe that the moon does not rise and set like the sun, but always floats around the sky until it is dark enough to see it."

There are many good questions that you can spring on people to determine whether their education has included basic science. Asking where the moon rises is almost as good as asking what causes the moon to shine. You wouldn't believe some of the answers that are given by space opera fans as well as by professors of literature!

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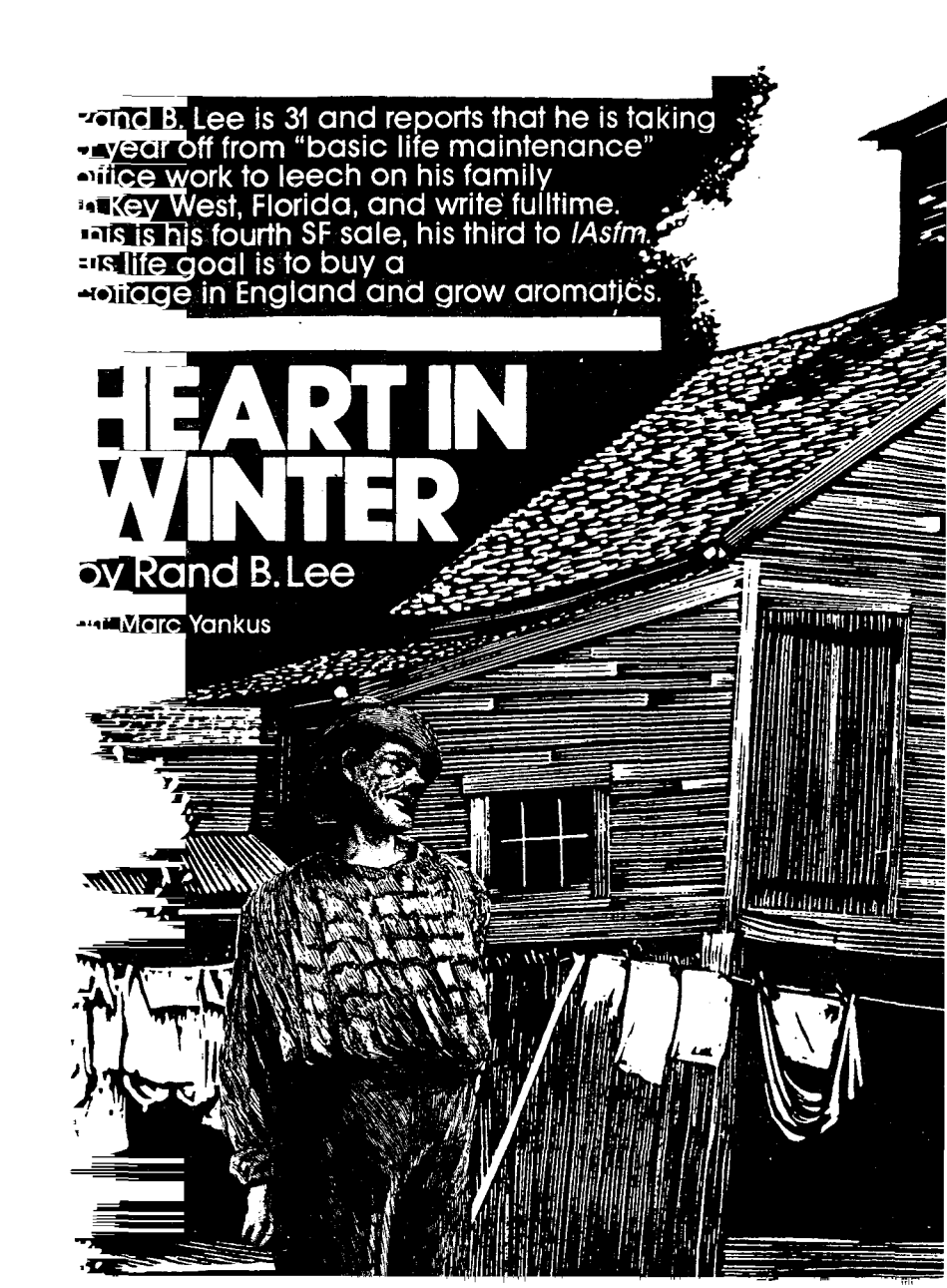
and B. Lee is 31 and reports that he is taking
year off from "basic life maintenance"
office work to leech on his family
in Key West, Florida, and write fulltime.
his is his fourth SF sale, his third to IAsfm.
his life goal is to buy a
cottage in England and grow aromatics.
HEART IN
WINTER
by Rand B. Lee
Marc Yankus

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Oh, it is a sorry song, the song I must sing, because it is about *him*, the Only Child, the Babe in the Wood, the Snake in the Grass, all four of him (I am one). They chased him through the alleys where the snow was not thick, and when he took a chance and ducked between the burned-out Super-Sinema and the steel-caged laundromat, he knew they were going to catch him. The last time he had come this way, foraging, there had been a wooden fence. Someone had torn it down and erected a smooth slippery slick aluminum one in its place. He scrambled up the garbage cans and put his small back to the fence. He had never been very big: five foot two, eyes of blue, curly black hair to go with his muddied skin (he used to tell Doctor Suyak that his mother was a Ubangi princess). He waited against the wall for the cops. He was Snake, the savvy one. He could hear with his ears their boots thudthud on the concrete, and he could hear them with our mind, their thoughts terrifyingly soft, like lovers' thoughts. (He would not have thought of this allusion.)

They came around the brick corner, the man and the woman. It had been a long chase. Their uniforms were stained, as all uniforms were in this the Year of National Emergency Fourteen Going On Fifteen. "Freeze! Police!" she yelled, and he yelled, "Freeze, you little bugger." She flashed him a look of disapproval, which made Snake grin. Her mind was a neat package of iron and cream, his a roil of thunder and blood. We watched them approach, the man's gun at the ready, the woman's radio raised to her lips. The man said, "Come on, kid, gimme an excuse." He was grinning. The woman flicked off her radio and hooked it back on her belt. "Let's go, kid," she said. "Off the can, slowly, now."

Snake is a kid, sixteen years old. I am a tall well-muscled blonde of thirty-five, but I look thirty. Snake got down from the garbage can. "You're fast," said the man. "We damn near lost you."

"Don't try anything," said the woman. We stood there, our heels to the can, while she prepared the syringe. Snake wriggled his way inside the man's head. Red stormed around us. Snake found the image he was looking for: a woman with breasts the size of boulders and a cavernous vagina. *Only*, called Snake. *Come out and do your stuff.* Only came forward. I was observing all this compassionately, as it were from a height, but I could not intervene and did not wish to. None of us wanted to go back to the hospital. Snake yelled, *Now!* Only gave the cop a good push. Blood spurted. Things tightened and hardened and relaxed, and all at once the thunder and fire were no longer deep beneath the surface but surging up into the winter morning.

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The cop went, "Oh," and then, "Oh, Christ!" and grabbed at his groin. It was very funny. Then he looked at his partner, and saw what Snake and Only wanted him to see, and we were home free. The syringe dropped in the dust and rolled. The woman yelled what are you doing you crazy son of a bitch and planted a knee where it counted, she being by far the better fighter. Snake took over from Only and we ran.

Snake is a good runner. We ducked into a basement we knew and crouched with some friendly rats while boots thudded. Animals rarely trouble empaths, a fact you probably did not know. I am the empath. Snake is the telepath. Only is the telekinete. We don't know what Babe is. He started a fire once, but he didn't mean to; he was having a particularly vivid dream, and it just happened. Doctor Suyak told me that Babe might be the self that is forming out of all of us. If he is, he's taking his own sweet time about it. We can hardly be described as an integrated personality, and most of the time Babe just sleeps. Which is one solution.

He slept now, terrified not at all by our little escapade, though Only was chattering our teeth and Snake had wet our jeans. *All clear,* said Snake. *I've had it with this city. That's the sixth time this month the cops have hassled us. We're running out of supermarkets.*

Jared, said Only. *He never leaves us alone.*

We don't know that, hon, I said to Only. *For all we know, he's fled the country.*

What? What? said Snake, irritably. He can't hear Only, though he's the one who can call him out. I reported Only's fear. To my surprise, Snake said, *It fits. Why else would we get picked on when the cops let creeps like Germain steal the tits right out from under their noses?*

I like Germain, I said.

Cause you've got the hots for him, you stupid bitch, said Snake.

He helped us get through those first few months when we would've died, I said. Beautiful strong Germain with his beautiful long hair. Being an athletic woman, I go for athletic men, but they have to be sensitive. Snake snickered. I was about to light into him when Only said, *What about Ann?*

What about her? I asked.

She'll take us back. We can go to the farm and live with her again, like before.

I felt sad, as I always feel when Only blocks something. *Hon, Doctor Ann is dead. She's in heaven. We're on our own now.*

Don't tell me; let me guess, said Snake. *The tot wants to go home*

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to nice Miz Suyak. Only, you idiot, you told us yourself that Jared killed her! That's why he wants to kill us, the only witness.

Only whimpered. *I forgot,* he said.

The trouble is, we don't know for a fact that's true, I pointed out. Only fretted, Snake stewed, and I mulled. We had been living on the farm a couple of years. Doctor Suyak had helped us start working together, so that Snake wouldn't get us in trouble and leave me out in the middle of it to take responsibility, and so that the researchers could test our talents, which fascinated them. We were highly classified, a far cry from what we'd been before Ann had found us. Jared had been the other Top Secret. He could throw twenty-five-pound bags of corn twelve feet without touching them.

One day we were in the barn feeding the cows when Jared came in. He was very muscular but too crude for my taste; nonetheless, I did my best to keep Snake civil to him. I remember looking up and smiling at him, then feeling something very hot, like snakebite, wash through me. Then I remember nothing at all. I woke up in the snow with Snake yammering in our head. We had our hiking boots and our parka on, but no gloves, and our fingernails had blood on them. Also we were missing a few teeth. Snake had just come to as well and wanted to know what the hell had happened. So I had asked Only.

Only had never come out on his own before. It took me an hour to put together his story. He claimed that Jared had attacked us in the barn, and he had come out to defend us. What he had done to Jared I never did find out, but Only had run, and the first thought in his head had been, *Find Doctor Ann.* He claimed that he had found her lying in the study with her head all over the carpet. Panicked, he had taken us off through the woods.

End of story. We were afraid to go back to the farm. We had hitchhiked to the city and arrived in the middle of a very bad snowstorm. Germain had found us and taken care of us. We had thought ourselves safe from Jared until we had started feeling him on our track. And that is when the cops had begun to hassle us, as Snake puts it. *What if Only imagined Ann was dead?* I asked Snake. *You know how paranoid he is.*

He didn't imagine our broken teeth, said Snake. *Or the fact that Jared's been following us.*

I vote we find out once and for all, I said. *I vote we go back to the farm.*

No, whimpered Only. And then, *Yes.*

All right, growled Snake. *It's probably the last place Jared would think of looking for us.* It didn't occur to us to consult Babe. Only

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knew Snake and me but not Babe; I knew Babe but couldn't talk with him; Snake got a headache every time he tried to call Babe out ("just to see what would happen"); and as far as we knew, Babe wasn't aware that we existed at all. So the three of us decided.

I'm going to tell Germain, I said. So Snake let me out, and I took us to find Germain.

It was snowing again. This made Only, who hates anything white, curl up in a ball and go to sleep. Snake was tired and withdrew to the upper balcony. I was alone in the drifting street. I had not been out for a while, because although I am athletic and blonde, I am not a survivor, and Snake is. Pisceans are not survivors. The woes of the world prey heavily upon us; that is why my name is Heart. When I was a young, fat, freckled teenager in New Rochelle, New York, my favorite authors were Carson McCullers and Joseph Conrad. When I met Germain, I realized that "romance" is a hopelessly inadequate word for what it is possible to feel. I walked us through the snow to the whorehouse, and there he was. "Hello, Germain," I said.

He had cut his hair, and his eyes were sharper than I remembered. "Well, well," he said. "It must be Heart."

"Of course it is," I said. "I would have come sooner, but Snake has been out most of the time, and he doesn't like you."

"Pretty ungrateful, it seems to me, seeing as how I saved your collective ass."

He was radiating a peculiar mix of feelings: expectation and disappointment and pleasure. "You're waiting for somebody," I said. "I'll come back another time." I turned to go. He caught my arm. I let him draw me up the steps of the brownstone and into the dark foyer. In the dark we moved together; it had always been in the dark, because although I am tall and blonde and have beautifully formed breasts, people see Snake when they look at me, and Germain didn't like thinking of himself as queer. It had been a long time since anyone had touched me. I was quite shamelessly aroused. "You cut your beautiful hair," I whispered.

"I also moved," he said softly. He pulled my head back suddenly. "You always find me, wherever I go." I was stunned to see that he was afraid of me, even though he was in control.

"Nobody saw me," I said.

"The money I could have made off of you," said Germain. Then he laughed and hugged me. He released me suddenly, very serious. "You can't stay here. I've got a new operation. My angel's real cautious."

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I nodded. "I came to say goodbye. We're going back upstate." His eyes narrowed. "It'll be all right. We have to; we can't last much longer here."

"No," he said. "Not like you've been doing." He hugged me again, a warm close enveloping, and I said to my selves, *Remember this in the winter moments.* I can smell him still, and smell that cold hallway; you'd think that it would be harder to smell things in winter, but some smells never go away. "This is one hell of an old town," Germain once said to me. "It was an old town when the traders kicked the Indians out of it." In the middle of the hug I felt Babe stir. He was just turning over in his sleep, but in that second or two my senses expanded hugely and spread out through the brownstone. I was Germain shuddering against me; I was the sleeping things in the cold walls; I was the girl on the bed in the red room and the old woman smoking beside her; I was pushing a needle into my arm in the dust of a landing and fighting my covers in a crib under a papered window. Babe went back to sleep. I contracted.

"Jesus," said Germain. "The money I could have made off of you." There were noises outside in the street. "Out, out, the back," my love said. He slapped my rear and I ran, not looking back. I felt like Scarlett in the ruins of Tara. Once more in the cold I paused. *Keep moving, you imbecile,* said Snake. *It's a bust.* Boot noises, voices, not raised; Germain's voice calming. "It's not even noon," I protested. "They won't find anything."

"Hey, you." I turned slowly. I did not complete the turn; Snake pushed past me and kicked me back into my balcony. The cop was looking warily at us. "You all right, kid?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure," said Snake. "What's riding, man?"

"As if you didn't know," said the cop. "Go on, beat it." We beat it. I yelled, *They'll kill him, Snake!*

Nah, just lean on him, said Snake. *Pretty scene back there, by the way. I watched the whole thing, Sugar Lump.*

Shut up, you stinking voyeur, I snapped, which delighted Snake no end. He giggled all the way back to our hole.

So we left the city. I insisted on our dressing well. Our plan was to take the subway out to Fairmont and bus it to Roxbury, where the farm was. Snake got us past the subway cops with his best Mommy Mommy routine, and who was to know that we had our Castleton burner in our right parka pocket and our New Testament with Helps in our left? We got into the last subway car and sat down next to a neatly dressed Order of the Eastern

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Star type and hauled out our Bible. She leaned over. "Aren't you a little young to be traveling alone?"

Our body is Snake's age, sixteen, but because it is short and underfed, it looks twelve. Snake smiled sweetly at her and pushed our plain-glass glasses up on our nose. "I just turned forty," he said. "An unfortunate mutation, side effect of the megahep that slew my mother." This shut her up. We rode in unmolested comfort until North Junction, when the car stopped and I got a blast of something so virulent my yell pushed past Snake's control and turned heads. *What is it?* he snapped.

Jared, I said. *He's near.* Only was gibbering.

Snake scanned. *Near is right; two cars down. He just got on. Coming this way: he's got us pegged. Only's been leaking again, damn him!*

I can't help it, wailed Only.

Move it, Snake, I cried. Snake moved us. We slipped out of the car as the doors closed. The platform was up in the open air, and the walkways were a mass of ice. We slipped and slid down one stair and followed dim signs to the men's room. Jared followed, his breath coming quickly, his anger like acid. I felt myself starting to close up like a flower. Snake jabbed me. *The hell you will,* he said. *Stay with me on this, Heart, for God's sake; you want to live?* We got to the men's room. It was full of what the Eastern Star lady would have termed unfortunate products of the breakdown of the American family. We dived in among them, which embarassed some, amused others, and enticed a few. Snake crouched and we listened. Only's paranoia aside, it was indeed Jared. He was coming down the stairway, cursing as he slid. *Only,* Snake snapped. *Come out.* Only cowered. *Sweetheart,* I said, *hon, we're in a lot of trouble, but we can get out of it if you help.* Only's terror was showing on our face and attracting some attention from the holiday crowd. "Willya freak somewhere else, for Christ's sake?" one kind soul suggested.

"Mind your own business," said Snake. *Heart, he's coming down the corridor. Whatever we do we gotta do now.*

He's following Only, I said. *We've got to shut off, Snake. Shut down all the way.*

Heart, he knows we're in here!

Only screamed. Everything around us stopped. The scream really did bounce off the walls, just as they say screams do. You have never seen a john clear out so fast. The scream tore Snake loose from his moorings. For an instant Only was out; then nobody was, or we all were at once except for Babe, who slept on and on.

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And there was Jared. Big brown eyes, big brown moustache, big shoulders and chest and the nicest big stretched grin of a mouth. Features, but no face. "Hi, little Joey," he said. He picked us up without touching us and held us near the ceiling. "Good to see ya, kid." He turned us upside-down and shook us. Our New Testament with Helps got snagged in our pocket, but our Castleton burner fell out onto the dirty tile with a neat clitter-clat. Then he dropped us.

(At one end of the corridor his mother is screaming at him, and at the other end the white door in the white wall is blinking an attractive blue light. The nurse is telling him a story. He tries to listen to him, but his mother's screaming distracts him. She is wearing her yellow dress with the daisies. Long after he can no longer see her he can see them, looking at him with their petaled eyes. He wants to tell them to stop looking; he tries, but no words come. *Of course not,* the voice says. *They've drugged you, you imbecile.)*

(Go away, he says. *You did this. They're going to kill us because of you.)*

(Whatcha talking, boy? says the voice cheerfully. *I is yo' salvation. If it wasn't for me, we'd still be rotting in the Home. They're just going to do a few tests, is all.)*

(He begins to calm. *How do you know?* he asks. He has been used to these voices in his head. This one in particular has been a trouble to him, and it is odd for him to feel comforted by it.)

(The lady doctor, says the voice. *She said so, remember? Or weren't you listening? We is an anomaly, boy. We is an A Number One Top Secret Multiple Talent. If we play our cards right, we is gonna be rich.)*

(*But who are you?* he asks. The voice chuckles.)

(Call me Snake, says Snake. *And your name is Joey DeVane. Hold onto that fact, my boy; you're gonna have one kazoo of a headache tomorrow morning.* Snake is partly wrong. The next morning we have a headache, but Joey is dead, and I am peering out of his eyes with my blonde curls all over the pillow.)

When we hit the floor, Snake had retreated and gallantly allowed me to experience the impact. Being athletic, I rolled and came up on my knees. I faced Jared. There was no Jared. I heard a long faraway scream in my head, like a train whistle shrieking from the next county. In the litter on the floor was the burner. Snake had come home with it one day; I'd never had the courage

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to ask him where he'd gotten it. *Let me look at it,* said Snake. I gave up control to him and faded thankfully back into the dimness.

He almost got us, whispered Only to me.

He may never have been here, hon, I said.

Only tensed. *What do you mean?* he said. *Who shook us upside-down without touching us? You were there; you saw it.*

We weigh ninety-three pounds, I answered patiently. *Jared could never push that much.*

You don't know, wailed Only. *You don't know.*

No, I said. *But I'm going to find out. I'm tired of all this. I never know what's real and what isn't.*

Snake got us on the bus with money he'd gotten from who knows where, then withdrew, and I had to endure the cigarette smoke and the discomfort and the faulty heating system. I had been out more that day than I had been in weeks. I hate the city; I always have. When I was a girl in New Rochelle, I used to spend the summers at my grandmother's farm, where there were climbing trees and goats. It was there that I lost my baby fat and blossomed into a woman.

I sat and looked out of the window. Only was crying, back in the back of our head. The bus from North Junction was different from the one we'd planned to take from Fairmont; it went not through Roxbury but through New Milford, a town close by. This meant we would have a longer hitchhike, and at night. I began to feel hungry. The city was below us, white and gray and black, grimy with old signs, some of them so old they were painted on the bricks and had periods at the ends. The snow covered some of the ugliness but not much.

The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter, I thought. Then I began to cry. It took me so much by surprise that I nearly retreated in embarrassment, but everyone was asleep so I had to stay. I leaned our head against the window. My curls did not seem very blonde in the winter light of afternoon. I saw Doctor Suyak's face. She is blonde, like me, though I am prettier, as though that matters. I had never met anyone as nice as she. Even my mother, who spoke French. Of course Only's mother had been terrible, always screaming. Like Joey's.

Like Joey's.

"Hello, Joey." I turned, and there sitting next to me on that bus was Jared. He did not look the same. He had a beard and was dressed in a suit. He had worn lumberjack shirts and jeans at the farm. He was smiling. I was very calm. I did not cry out to the

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others. I felt nothing. The bus driver shifted gears. Very softly Jared said, "If you yell, you'll regret it. Understand?"

"You're not real," I said. "You're not even here."

"Which one are you?" Jared asked. I did not understand how he could have changed clothing so quickly. He had not been wearing a suit in the men's room.

"You can see," I said.

"I see a little kid who should be acting his age," Jared answered. "Do you know how long we've been looking for you? Why did you run out on us?"

Nothing, I felt nothing. I could smell him, though; he was nervous and sweating. *In the barn he,* the thought came, and flew away. "I want Doctor Ann," I said.

"She's waiting for you. Back at the farm."

"I don't believe you." I tried to stand up and saw his forehead crease, and then I couldn't make my legs work.

"Don't make me," he said. "Just relax. No one's going to hurt you."

"You hit me," I said.

"When?" he asked quietly. "I never touched you." I still felt nothing. This frightened me very much, because I am an empath. *Snake,* I said. *Snake. Only.*

Kill him, said Snake.

Snake sounded weak and distant, not like Snake at all. *Only?* I called. No answer. "Take these," said Jared. I looked down. In his big hand he held three white pills. "You'll feel better. You'll be able to think more clearly. Take them."

"I need water," I said.

"Take them, Joey," Jared said. I took the white pills and put them into our mouth. I was going to stuff them in my cheek and only pretend to swallow them, but somehow they were gone and down before I had time to think. "Good," said Jared. "Now try to get some sleep. We have a long ride ahead of us, and Ann is waiting to talk to you. She's not in a very good mood," he added.

Kill him, kill him, said Snake. I could barely hear him. I put our head on the back of the seat and closed our eyes. *For God's sake, Heart, what are you doing?* Snake cried. *You let him drug you. Goddammit, Heart!*

And then:

(I am making love with Germain. His beard feathers my beautiful breasts and the coverlet lies over us in pale mounds like snow. Doctor Suyak, whom I resemble, stands by the window watching. She is saying, "No, no, Joey, look deeper, always look

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deeper." I look. It is not Germain who kisses me but Jared. We are lying not in bed but in the barn. The scent of the hay is about us. I reach up and pull)

No.

(pull him closer to me and)

No!

(and he is standing over me with his hands in fists and his face enraged saying, "Get out of my head, get out," and he brings his fist down and)

"Stop this goddam bus." Jared had yanked me out of the seat and was pushing me before him down the aisle. People were staring, some of them protesting, but feebly; Jared is a big man. "Stop the bus!" he yelled at the driver. Somebody stood up and put out a restraining hand. Jared threw a look at him and he sat down as suddenly as though he had been pushed.

"What's wrong?" I said. But the bus had stopped on the highway, and the doors had opened. We fell out into the snow. Jared began to shake me, touching me, shaking me by my parka. "Stop," I said.

"Get out of my head, damn you!" he yelled. The bus doors remained open. Everyone was looking out of the windows. I thought, *How odd they must think us,* and

(he is hitting me with his fist and)

"Why are you angry?" Only wailed.

Jared stopped shaking us. "First the woman," he said. "Now the five-year-old. Jesus." He let go of us. I don't know how Only got out, but he did, and it was he who faced Jared, standing up to our hips in the snow he hated.

"You're always hitting," said Only. "Why are you so angry?"

"You're always in my head," said Jared. "I can't get rid of you. I go to sleep at night and you're there, running down some alley somewhere calling for your mother. You—"

(She is wearing her yellow dress with the daisies. She looks a little like Doctor Suyak, actually, a fact we have not noticed before. We suppose it has some significance. We love Mother, but we love Ann more, because she does not leave us alone with our heart.)

"—drag on me until I think I'm going to go crazy from it."

"*You've* been following *us,*" said Only.

"Trying to find you," said Jared.

"Trying to kill us," said Only, "the way you killed Doctor Ann." We waited for our triumph, but Jared merely looked baffled. "We

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saw her," insisted Only. "She was on the floor. Her head was all—"

(We are running through the snow. Jared is running after us, screaming about queers. In that he and Germain are alike. Only calls for Doctor Suyak, but she does not answer.)

"She was gone," said Jared. The breath was coming from his lips in great plumes. "She went away for the weekend. She told you all about it."

(We run into the big house, past the chicken yard. One of the dogs has succumbed to temptation at last and has dragged the layer named Bozo from her patch of straw. We run into the house, calling for Doctor Ann. There is chicken blood in a trail from the kitchen stoop down the hall. Everywhere there are white feathers.)

Only, I called. *Only, come back inside. This is all a mistake.* Snake was laughing hysterically, which didn't help matters.

"She isn't dead?" asked Only. Jared pushed his fingers through his beard. He shook his head. The bus driver blasted his horn. "But you hit me," said Only. He began to cry. I am the empath, and the sorrow of it was more than I could bear. I wept with him, and we all wept, Snake included, though he hid his face so I wouldn't think he was a sissy. I say "all," but who knows about Babe?

"You're too strong," said Jared. "You don't know your own strength. Come back with me to the farm. She's alive, she's waiting, she loves you, you'll see."

Then Only was inside and I was outside. "Well," I said brightly. "That's enough of that." Jared stared. "Please have patience with us, Jared. Our blood sugar is low. I'll try to keep Snake and Only out of your head until we get back to the farm."

The driver stuck his head out of the door. "If you two don't simmer down and come back in here, I'm gonna have to leave without you."

We reentered the bus. I walked proudly, smiling graciously to the right and left. We resumed our seat, and the bus started once more. No one said a word. I sat straight and tall. Jared slumped beside me, looking small, which is some feat for a man of his build. By now you have gathered that he was a good telekinete, better than Only, but a rather poor telepath. No defenses. "I love you both, you know," I said to him.

He smiled without opening his eyes. "I'm just your Project buddy. But I appreciate the compliment."

Like fish he does, said Snake. I said nothing, but smiled in my

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turn. The medicine finally was beginning to work. I lay back in our seat and looked out the window again. If Doctor Suyak turned out to be dead, we would kill Jared. There was no question about that. I did not think it would have to come to that. The heart is a lonely hunter, especially in winter, but even the hunter knows when to come in out of the snow, and move toward the warm lit windowpanes of home. O

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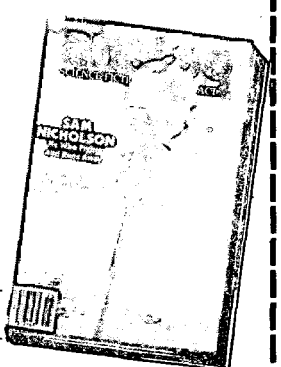

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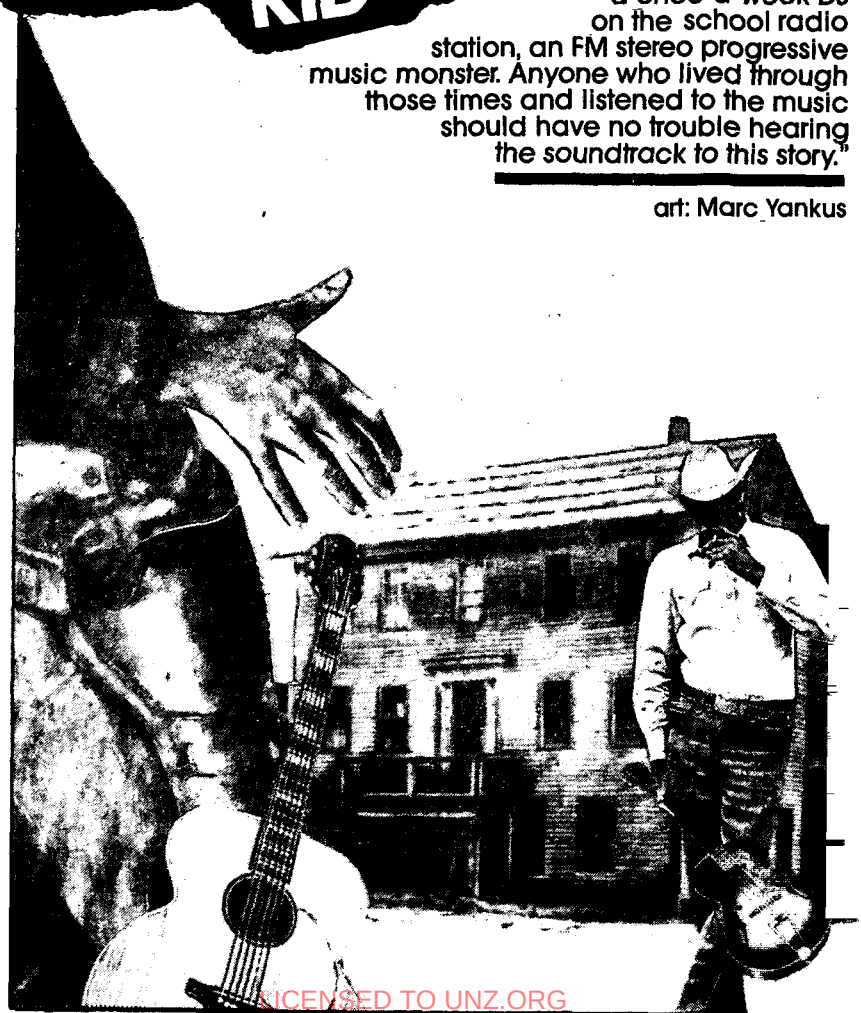
THE BALLAD OF JAKE THE SNAKE AND THE ROCK-AND-ROLL KID

by J. P. Killus

The author says, "When I was in college I was a once-a-week DJ on the school radio station, an FM stereo progressive music monster. Anyone who lived through those times and listened to the music should have no trouble hearing the soundtrack to this story."

art: Marc Yankus



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The Rock and Roll Kid was back in town, looking toward more notches for the neck of his pearl inlaid Stratocaster. Only one instrument had ever made the Kid back down: the deadly black handbuilt of Jake the Snake. And who was to say which was worse, Jake or the Kid? It was a choice few cared to make, to die beneath the punk metal frenzy of the Kid or to go down bleeding from the hard atonalities of the Snake, ratatat-tating your life away?

This is the story of the last songfight between Jake the Snake and the Rock and Roll Kid.

The black box, which converted electronically amplified music into psycho-physical power, was invented in the last days of industrial civilization, when the missiles were poised and fingers of death caressed the big button. No Science ever penetrated the mysteries of the black box; its workings seemed based on art and style rather than on objective reality. Yet in the end it saved mankind. When the button went down and the missiles went up, it was music that saved us, as we always knew it would. While the missiles were still in the air, the Beatles reformed for their ultimate gig. They had no replacement for John, but his guitar played anyway, strummed by ghostly fingers. Such were the mysteries of the black box.

The Fab Four sang *Get Back* for one last time. And the missiles *did* get back, into their silos, to crash and rend but not explode.

The world was saved—but at a price.

For something in that one last song, the harmonies perhaps, or George's final (and, it should be emphasized, *necessary*) guitar solo, ripped at the earth's ozone layer, laying the lands bare to solar ultraviolet, ping-ponging the jet stream, and setting off the climate changes and crop failures that smashed civilization. In the rubble, feudalism was reborn, each country retreating into its primitive past. Chivalry was resurrected in Europe, the Samurai once more ruled Japan, and in America, the frontier west was again ateem with outlaws, road agents, and young kids looking for a rep.

And the six-string guitar ruled supreme.

It was cool morning when the Kid rode into town. The bank and the general store were still closed, and honest folks were at the breakfast table. Only the saloon was open full, for drunks keep their own hours and gamblers never sleep. The Kid made straight for the saloon, stopping only to flip a coin to a brown-

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faced boy to take his horse to livery. Then he strode through the swinging doors, looking for a game of cards, a cool beer, and maybe a death or two.

The Rock and Roll Kid killed his first man at the age of twelve, with a hard-edged blues medley far in advance of his years. His father, a bitter and arthritic man, had taught the Kid everything that a second-rate former songfighter can teach, but the Kid was much better than this. It's said that the gods in their perversity sometimes favor a callow youth over better and more deserving men. So it was with the Rock and Roll Kid.

It was dry afternoon when Jake the Snake rode into town, and all about him was the dust. A hot dry wind was on the rise, a wind to make devils stir and hair stand on end. Jake rode slowly through the heat, a shimmering phantom on a thirst gray horse. Weariness hung about him as thickly as the flies that followed all that moved on such a day and at such a time.

They say that Jake was a doctor once, a strong-handed surgeon who preserved life rather than stripped it away. But his wife of three weeks was riffed down before his eyes, and when he operated to save her, she died on the table beneath his knife. So he quit the scalpel and went after her killers. He got them one by one. When it was over, there wasn't anything left for Jake to do but become a songfighter.

The Sheriff met Jake as he rode into town, a block from the saloon. The Sheriff's guitar was slung low, and he was sleepy-voiced, but there was just the slightest tremble in the lawman's hands. Jake noticed this twitchiness, a sign that belied the sleepy affectations. The Sheriff was a good man and had a fast riff, but no lawman short of Pecos was a match for Jake. Maybe he had no match anywhere. So the man behind the badge was scared.

"I'd take it as a mighty favor if you'd just keep ridin', Jake," said the Sheriff.

"I can't do that," said the Snake. "even had I the mind to. My horse is about to drop, and I'm pretty tired myself. Wouldn't get ten miles."

"There's no room at the hotel."

"Then I guess I won't be be staying there."

The Sheriff sighed, "The Kid's in town, Jake. I can't let you stay."

"You might ask the Kid to leave, then, Sheriff. Maybe you'll have more luck." Jake hitched his horse forward.

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"There'll be trouble if you stay, Jake."

"Maybe so, maybe so. If there is, I'll try to keep it reasonably quiet. I wouldn't want to disturb anybody."

No one told the Rock and Roll Kid that Jake was in town. No one wanted to hasten the inevitable. The two had met before, twice before, in point of fact. The first was early in the Kid's infamous career, and he'd had to eat crow rather than tangle with a musician clearly his better. The second time had been only months before and had ended in ambiguous circumstances. The Kid claimed he'd scared Jake off (and who was to argue with the Rock and Roll Kid?). But even those who could imagine Jake backing down once could not imagine him doing so twice. Folks knew that the next time they met, one would die for sure. So no one told the Kid; Death would come in his own good time.

The Kid found out, though, from somewhere. Maybe he overheard a careless remark, or maybe a death muse whispered in his ear. Whatever the reason, he showed no surprise when, late that evening, he found Jake over a game of cards in the Wild Cur Saloon. The Kid just smiled a nasty smile and said to Jake and the other three men at the table, "Empty chair . . . Can anybody join?"

"Money's the same color, no matter who loses it," was the reply.

So the Kid pulled the chair back to the wall and sat down next to the Snake. The two men, seated against the corner walls, had full view of the nearly deserted saloon. And well it might be deserted. Fear had emptied it hours ago. Only quiet, desperate drunks would dare to stay here now, the fear of a lonely, sober night outweighing the fear of songplay and the sight of sudden death. So the serious drunks were still about, and the serious gamblers, who, apart from Jake and the Kid, numbered only three. For the five men sitting at the table, this was literally the only game in town.

The game played on through the night, with an eastern gambler doing what winning there was and the Kid doing the losing. Jake stayed even, which rankled the Kid. He didn't like being bested, least of all by Jake. He was not used to losing, either. People feared his quick temper and quicker fingers too much to keep good card sense in his presence. The easterner just didn't know who he was dealing with.

Then finally, about mid-morning, after his third busted flush in a row, the Kid blew up.

"I've had enough!" the Kid exclaimed. "I think you're cheatin',

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gambler, and I'm calling you on it." The Kid stood up, his right hand cocked at his side.

The room went dead still. The gambler's eyes went wide, and his face turned white. He stared at the Kid like a snake-frozen rabbit.

"Leave him be, Kid," came a voice, and there was another Snake's stare to contend with. "He's no cheat."

"Are you callin' me a liar?" the Kid's eyes went steely.

"Just a lousy card player, Kid," Jake replied. "Don't pass up the truth when it's handed you on a plate. You'll get real hungry for it someday, if you live that long."

"You're calling me a liar, and you'd better take it back," grated the Kid.

The Snake shook his head. "Backed down once in Waco, Kid. That's my limit."

He looked at the gambler. "Pick up your money and get out, friend. The Kid and me got business to attend to." He looked at the Kid and heaved a sigh. "C'mon Kid, it's what we've both been waiting for. You'll never be any better, and I'll never live to get any worse."

The sun was hot that day. It always seems hotter or colder or drier or darker on a day when a man is going to die. And there was no doubt in anyone's mind, as they watched Jake and the Kid take up their positions in the street, that one of them was going to die. The townspeople could only hide in the shops and saloons, crouched beneath the windows, hypnotized by the unfolding scene.

"Play, Kid," said Jake the Snake. "Make it good."

The Rock and Roll Kid made it good. He launched into *Oh Well*, an ancient song stringing mutant lyrics to a ripping buzzsaw lead:

I'm the seventh son of a seventh son,
I know the future before it's begun.
Just don't ask me that my words be true,
I might not answer what you want me to.

Jake just smiled. He played a lick here, a fill there, and the buzzsaw passed him by, six inches distant at the nearest point. Then, striking a chord, he began *Cobra*, a John Cippolina instrumental that had killed six men in Abilene the year before. The electric yellow notes went slithering up the street to snap at the boots of the Rock and Roll Kid. The Kid beat them down with sheer raw energy—slashing chords from the early Kinks and the Who. The music had already called up phantom drummers and bass lines, a backbeat made actual by the insistent reality of the music.

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So it went. The Kid was stripped to the waist, and his sweat glistened in the afternoon sun. The music too, flowed in rivers, great cascading rapids of sound that issued forth to beat about the cool black figure of Jake the Snake. Counter to the Kid's power were the twisting threads of the Snake's virtuosity, shimmering, crackling, writhing like sea serpents, trying to drink the cascade.

I play a guitar strung with barbed wire,
With lightning bolts in my amplifier,
Got a bungalow on the darkside,
Where nightmares come to hide.
Got an attic full of snakes and crows,
Black as the night above,
Come on tell me your history,
Tell me, who do you love?
Who do you love?

A wind was rising—from where, no one could tell. It was hot, a Santa Ana kind of wind that made hair stand on end with the static and despair. And something strange was happening to sound and light. The music from the street was already too complex for two or even two dozen men to make. It had taken on a life of its own—one life. This was no longer a songfight between two men. There was now a great carnivorous beast thrashing about in the center of town, a beast whose cries and shrieks were full of distortion and fuzztone, and whose limbs flailed in syncopated time.

Over the top of it were the two soaring guitar leads no longer at dissonance, but filling in each the other's runs. The sounds no longer clashed. They fed each other, the power now out of direct control. It grew and grew 'til it filled the sky.

All the royal courtiers
Watched as the turmoil grew.
Guardsmen stopped each passerby,
Detaining quite a few.
In the distant moonlight,
The gray wolves did prowl,
Piercing inner circles
The wind began to howl.

The Kid had seen it coming, but much too late. Without the Kid's noticing at first, Jake had taken hold of the music nearest him and made it his own. He had hit a harmonizing chord and given the animal life. Now the two stood at the nodes, unharmed

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but unable to control the thing they fed. The Kid cursed. What was the Snake up to?

Jake the Snake just played. Lord how he played! He was feeding the beast with all he had, and Jake knew more than just Rock and Roll. Three-chord riffs were followed by baroque counterpoints, and those were followed by A-minor melodies that called forth the sound of Spanish trumpets. Then Stravinsky, as interpreted by Frank Zappa. Dixieland jazz and Prokofiev. John Coltrane, Haydn, and John Phillip Sousa. *Rigoletto*, Grateful Dead, and *I Am the Walrus*. Snatches of sound that made women blush and grown men cry.

Tennessee Voodoo got me,
Down deep in my soul.
I was raised on Hank Williams
And rock and roll.
Got the Memphis blues, Mama,
Outside of Mobile again.
Must have heard this song before,
Just don't know when.

At some point the images began . . . swirling colors at first, coalescing into patterns of light and shade. In the beginning, the townsfolk all saw different sights, their primal urges and private thoughts revealed to them. Then there appeared shimmering images of creation and destruction. Of childbirth and the last war. Of Michelangelo and concentration camps, Van Gogh and Goebbels. Then the ghosts began to walk.

There was Janis Joplin singing her voice to tatters in a small Texas club. There was Mick Jagger strutting at Altamont. The Beatles played *Get Back* one last time, and John Coltrane shrieked joy and rage into a saxophone. A crowd rioted at the first performance of *The Rite of Spring*. Link Wray attacked a speaker with a screwdriver and invented fuzztone, and Chopin played as he coughed his life away.

The ghosts were images of tragedy and heroism and beauty. They were the moments that deserve to live forever, despite entropy, despite negligence, despite evil. Louis Armstrong played until his lips split and blood dripped down his chin. Phil Ochs recited his songs in Hoffman's court. Chuck Berry skips across the stage. Pete Townsend smashes his guitar.

The sky was electric now, filling with towering thunderheads flashing thunder and lightning in time to unseen cymbals' crash. The winds played color, too, the prairie's dust sparkling blue and gold and green as it whipped through streets encased in sound.

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The sun broke through at scattered points and splashed light against the whirlwind clouds. The boiling masses that have become the world, pressed down.

Finally, eternity opens up and the thunder rolls through the town. Above it all stands the image of Jimi Hendrix playing a flame guitar. There is a resolving chord, a completion, a termination, and then the loudest thunderclap of all.

Then there was silence.

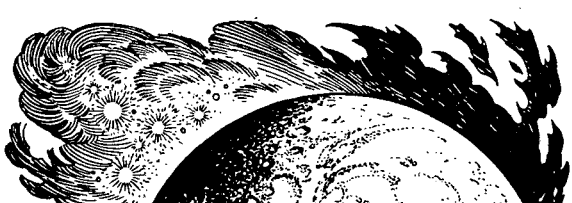
Few of the townspeople could see. The final flash had been blinding, and dust still hung in the air. Was anyone still alive after that? Was the world even still on its axis? Each onlooker checked himself for solidity. *Have I melted into shadow?* asked silent voices. *Does my heart still pump, can I still hear my breathing? Or am I struck blind and deaf by what I've seen and heard? Am I too numb to feel the ground beneath my feet?*

The Sheriff moved out into the light, staggering slightly, awestruck and dazed. A few other brave men came behind. "Do you see anything?" came a whisper from the shadows. "Shh, hush. Wait till the dust clears," said someone nearby. The Sheriff kept walking.

They found the Rock and Roll Kid lying in the dirt, more dead than alive, his hands all mangled and burned. It was clear he'd never play again.

Of Jake the Snake, there was no trace—just a scorched lump of metal and plastic that once might have been a guitar. So some give the day to the Kid, if you keep score on such things, and if Pyrrhic victories count.

Some say different, though. Some say you can go out on the prairie late at night and listen. It's always quiet there, except for the wind and the call of prairie wolves. And if your ears are good and if the moon is full, you'll hear him there: Jake the Snake, walking with his lady, and playing an eight-bar blues. ●



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A LONG WAY HOME

art: Gary Freeman

by Sheila Finch-Rayner

The author lives in Long Beach, California, but was born in London, England. She teaches fiction writing and SF at El Camino College and has had several short stories published. Currently she's putting the finishing touches on an SF novel.

The sun struck like a giant fist flattening an insect as Mayva emerged again onto the marketplace. She moved slowly, seeking the bars of brown shadow that alternated with the burning amber

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stripes of sun-blackened mud. Ahead of her, an old woman scuttled crablike, one hand clutching the shawl to her head against the heat, the other cradling the folded palm leaf containing a gray powder Mayva had just given her.

"You! Come here! My boy needs help."

The man who stood scowling in the doorway of the small, flat-roofed hut was Ruk, spokesman of the village by virtue of the fact that his vocal cords did not yet show signs of developing the nodes that robbed so many of their voice in adult life. He was a thickset man with heavily muscled arms on which the hairs grew long and dark, but he reached only to Mayva's shoulders, for his legs had ceased to grow while he was still a child. He held back the hide curtain through which he wanted Mayva to pass.

She drew her gray skirt up and stepped through the narrow opening. She said nothing, for there was nothing to say, and loose talk angered Ruk.

The interior of the hut was dark but almost as hot as the marketplace; what breeze there was outside was barred from the room by heavy cloths at the door and the one window. Mayva felt the sweat start out on her brow as she approached the bed, her eyes adjusting to the gloom. Ruk's oldest son, Gelor, lay motionless on the grimy pallet, his eyes sunken and closed, his mouth parted. For a moment she feared he was already dead and that Ruk would blame her for not coming sooner.

An old woman sat by the bed, stroking with one hand the boy's lank hair; six thin fingers crawled like centipedes through the tangles. She looked up as Mayva came near and opened her mouth soundlessly; her tongue was gray and bloated. Mayva knew the woman would not outlive her son by very long. The boy stirred feebly, and she turned her attention to him.

The ulcers that covered much of his body were suppurating, and the stench that rose from the bed sickened her. She forced herself to take his thin wrist in her hand and test his pulse. It was weak but constant.

"Goodwife Ruk, bring water and clean cloths that I may wash the sores on your son," she said.

She had tried so many times to explain to them that it was important to keep their bodies clean, but they seemed incapable of remembering her words once she was gone. Sometimes she wanted to scream at them for their stupidity, at the way they let the dogs crawl on the beds where sick children lay, the flies that they seemed not to notice laying eggs on the uncovered meat till it glowed with the green-blue phosphorescence of decay. Yet she

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held her tongue, knowing that although they needed her help, they feared her skills, and it would not take much to cause them to rise up and stone her to death.

The mother returned with a cracked pottery bowl in which tepid water sloshed, and Mayva could not be sure as she took it from her that the gray cast to the water was only a reflection from the clay. The cloth she knew was not clean, for the goodwife tore it from her own soiled robe. Mayva shut her lips firmly to hold back the protest that rose to them, feeling the burning anger of Ruk's gaze on her.

"Gelor," she said softly, "if you can hear me, I'm going to wash the sores and put a little salve in each. It will take away some of the pain."

But it would not prevent the boy from dying. There was nothing she could do to halt his death. And perhaps it was better that he die, for he had been slowly sinking into idiocy, unable to feed himself or know when he needed to eliminate, so that the mother had to maintain a constant watch on the bed, batting away the hordes of flies that signalled each new lapse.

Mayva worked methodically, rinsing off the filth that surrounded each ulcer and replacing it with a layer of sweet salve. The bowl had to be emptied and refilled with fresher water three times before she was done. Then she straightened up and replaced the jar of salve in her leather satchel.

"I can do no more for him," she said in answer to Ruk's unspoken question.

"Witch woman!" He spat, his face contorting in his hate, one eye pulled upward by a sudden spasm that threatened to tear the left half of his face from the right. "Monster! Where do you get such powers?"

She pushed back the tiredness that dragged at her. "Do you wish me to do anything else for you?"

Ruk shook his head and pointed to the opening. He would not feel comfortable until his hut was purged of the abomination of her presence. Mayva lowered her eyes and turned to the doorway.

"Do you find them in the desert, Witch? I've seen you go into that place of evil!"

She went out without replying, and the filthy curtain fell behind her. The sun hit her full on the brow again, but the air moved a little now and then, and for this much she was grateful. She continued on through the village.

It was a good question Ruk had asked. She did not know the answer. One day, a very long time ago, at sunset, she had stum-

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bled into the village from the desert. Her robe had been dusty but not torn, and her arms and legs bore only minor scratches, so she could not have been long in the desert's furnace. In her mind she had found knowledge: which herbs and roots were helpful against sickness and where to find them. And her hands were skillful at setting bones and soothing pain. But that was all she knew. She could not remember where she had been before she was in the desert, or anything other than her name.

Nor did she know why hers was the only body in the village that had grown straight and tall; whose arms were the same length, both hands displaying five fingers of matching shape (unlike Goodwife Ruk, who had six on one hand and three on the other); whose two legs bore her weight without limping; whose two eyes were set evenly in her brow, the ears likewise on either side of her head, neither one larger than the other; whose nose was a slight protuberance on her face, not a beak the size of a fist or a gaping hole; whose thick, dark hair grew only on her head.

The people of the village called her witch and monster. The little children loped on hands and feet after her in the street to throw stones, because they found her ugly. And the only thing she knew was she must help them. It was as if she had a debt to repay, though she had never seen the people of the village before that day at sunset, nor had they seen her.

And one more thing she knew, a thing she kept like a precious stone, wrapped and hidden from the eyes of thieves, to be taken out and turned over in her mind when she was alone. She knew that though she was the one who was different, hers was the body that was right.

"Woman!" a voice accosted her from a doorway. "Come tend to my goodman, who cannot take food."

There was little she could do for the goodman, whose tongue had swollen to fill up his mouth. But she persuaded the goodwife to brew him a little herb tea and trickle it slowly between the parched lips. At least it might ease the pain. He would not last long.

After him there was a baby born with two heads, and another with a head as large as its body. And then there was a girl with her face pulled in a perpetual snarl more suited to a dog, an old man who vomited continuously, and one whose abdomen had swollen like a seed pod about to burst.

So it went all day, every day, till it seemed to her that there was nothing in this village but decay, deformity, and flies. Yet on some days she could find a tiny shard of time to slip away from

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the village to the edge of the scorched emptiness that surrounded it. There in the desert she searched for the sparse, elusive plants to replenish her store. In one patch of soil beside an outcropping of rusty boulders, she had coaxed a few stunted vegetables to grow, carrying water from the village well and thatching palm strips across the dead scrub bush to give them a little shade. The villagers paid her for her services with food, but she was careful to eat as little as possible, both because they had so little to give and because what they had was often contaminated and spoiled. And some, like Ruk, were more likely to give her blows than payment, when the help she gave them did not match their hopes.

At sunset, the desert rim was streaked with mauve and rose, and a cloudwrack settled golden and glowing on the distant peaks. A trick of the light at this hour made the cloud-covered mountains behind which the sun set take on the shapes of towers and fantastic spires, so that she could imagine a city rested there. She did not allow herself such dreams for long. They aroused a wild longing in her to be free of the villagers and their torment. But she had nowhere to go, and they needed her; and such visions as arose in her mind at sunset only increased her pain.

The sky turned aquamarine as the sun vanished, but the heat still rose off the desert floor as she faced the west. As she did so, a small shadow detached itself from the last wall of the village and came near.

"Mayva?" the small voice said.

"What are you doing here, Bryn?" she said, dropping her satchel and kneeling in the dust.

The child came confidently into her arms and kissed her. "I was waiting for you. I knew you would be coming by. I've seen you working at your plants."

Ruk's youngest son was not like the rest of the children born in the village. His body was symmetrically formed, and he ran easily on two legs. The only sign he bore that guaranteed him kinship with his people was a dark red stain that spread like a mask over half his face and down his neck. But it was not enough to shield him from the anger of his father.

"You must go home, Bryn." Her heart cried out against the advice, for she had seen the bruises on his legs and arms, the cuts that blossomed suddenly on the child's lips. But she was an outcast too and could do nothing for him.

"Let me go with you, Mayva," he pleaded. "I can pour the water on the roots carefully and not waste a drop."

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"I'm not going to the garden tonight. I have to seek the herbs I use in my medicine."

"I'll help," the boy said. "I see well by moonlight. I'll find whatever you tell me to look for. Don't send me away. I wish I lived with you, Mayva," he finished wistfully. "I love you."

The weariness of the day's work flooded over her. She embraced the boy briefly, then set him at arm's length and rose from her knees.

"Someday, perhaps, but not now. Come, I'll walk back with you. I'll tell your father you were with me so he won't beat you."

She took the small hand in hers and turned her back to the desert. The child sighed but accepted her words without argument, as if he had not expected better luck. His difference stirred her deeply, speaking to something buried and out of reach in her closed memory. But she was too worn out by her labor to take on the boy's problems. They walked silently, hand in hand, and a sliver of new moon climbed up the sky behind them.

Lamplight spilled from Ruk's house, and a high wail greeted them. Bryn shivered and drew close to Mayva's side. As they stepped up to the door, the curtain was suddenly ripped aside and Ruk appeared, his twisted face wild with grief, his older son hanging limply in his arms. Gelor was dead.

Mayva's first reaction was relief for Gelor. Her second was fear for Bryn. She pulled the child close to her skirt, as if to hide him from the wrath of his father that would come pouring down on the unmarked and still living child.

But it was she that Ruk was staring at, for her the cry of rage that escaped his thickened lips.

"Witch! What did you do to my son? You've killed my son!"

The corpse in his arms shook, its fingers brushed the floor at the father's feet, scattering dust.

"Goodman Ruk," she began, "you know I did not kill Gelor. I tried to help him."

Fear rose within her as Ruk's hatred flowed like an almost visible wave against her. If he believed she had bewitched his son, he might kill her.

The goodwife appeared in the doorway behind her man, the six-fingered hand clawing the empty air. She saw her younger son hiding in the folds of Mayva's skirt, and shrieking, she reached for him and dragged him free. He stumbled against the doorpost, but she ignored his cries.

Ruk took a step toward Mayva, but the corpse made his movements clumsy. He roared at her but seemed unable to decide to

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put the dead boy down and pursue the one he accused as murderer. He swayed on the threshold, his face suffused with blood so that he looked as if he were about to burst into flame.

"Run, Mayva!" Bryn cried from around his mother's arm. "Run!"

Mayva ran.

She did not stop running until she reached the spot where she had left her satchel and the shouts of the goodman faded behind her. Then she sank onto the warm dust and buried her face in her arms and wept for all the ignorance and bestiality in the village, for the unending toil and hardship that was her life among these people, and for her own cowardice in not staying to protect Bryn from his father.

After a while the tears stopped and she stood up. She would not go back to the village. Her fear shamed her, and the tears welled again as she thought of the child she would be abandoning, but she fought the memory down. She did not belong to the village. They had never accepted her, nor had they ever been thankful for her help. Whoever or whatever she was, she was not one of them.

She could not cross the desert from which she had once come, for there were no roads across it. The villagers feared the desert and never set foot in it. The older ones still told of the days when the devil fires had flickered at night, the fires that killed at a distance. Nothing lived in the deep desert, Mayva knew. There were no trees to give shelter at midday, no water to stop the death that would surely come from dehydration.

The road from the village did not enter the desert, but wound toward a distant line of low hills. Whatever lay beyond those hills could not be any worse than what she had just left. She set off along the road.

The crescent moon rose weakly up the sky a little as she walked, then flopped back behind the hills. The stars flamed in the darkness and wheeled overhead like torches carried in some faraway procession. Hour after hour she walked, thinking of the sky, until her legs would no longer hold her. Then she wrapped herself in her cloak and lay in a ditch beside the road and slept.

Day was streaking the eastern sky with opal swirls of pink and lemon when Mayva came over a slight rise and saw the looming shadows of another village ahead of her. A light wind was rising, ruffling her hair and drying the sweat that glazed her skin. She stared at the village.

Apart from the child, Bryn, she had never seen another like

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herself. By what right could she expect the next village to contain people who would welcome her? She did not know if all the world was filled with people like Ruk and his goodwife, or whether there were others like herself. Again and again in the early days of her coming out of the desert, she had pushed her mind back to what must have happened to her. And again and again she had come to the point where the wall had been erected in her mind, separating before and after. She had found no way of scaling that wall. There was simply no way she could know. She would have to take a chance.

Then she saw a figure coming toward her on the road. She pulled her hood forward, shadowing her face. She did not wish to be too quickly marked as different. The figure grew in stature, and she could see from its gait that it did not suffer from deformed legs. It too was muffled in a cloak. In a moment it had drawn level with her as she stood waiting on the dusty road.

The figure walked purposefully down the middle of the path, and Mayva stepped off to one side. Awkwardly, her ankle struck against a boulder, and she cried out at the blow, her hood slipping back a little. Hastily she stifled her cry and tugged the hood back in place.

The figure hesitated and peered at her.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

The figure nodded and began to move on.

"Wait!" she said. "I mean, please wait a moment more. I am a healer. Tell me if I can find work and lodging up ahead."

Again the figure peered at her. She was aware of dark eyes burning in the shadows of the hood. It was a little taller than she and carried itself straighter than over half the people in the village she had left.

"Who are you?"

"Mayva," she said. "I've been living in the village at the desert's edge, though I share no kinship with those people."

"Mayva," the voice repeated.

Then the figure suddenly reached up and threw back its hood, revealing a dark, angular face with dark eyes under a sweep of black hair. The surprise of realizing there was no deformity in the face was swept away by the shock of recognition that raced through her. She knew the face!

"Shen," she said.

Immediately, a flood of images tumbled in her mind. Shen's face beside a shining wall, Shen's long-fingered hand reaching for

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hers, lights twinkling in a pattern like stars captured on a board. And nothing else. No more came. Though she strained to catch the images, it was as if she tried to grasp a swirl of mist.

"So you also remember?" he asked.

Bitterly she shook her head. "Only your name."

"More will come," he said. "That's the beginning."

"How can you know?"

"Do you think you're the only one they did it to? Look!" He thrust his hands out, allowing the cloak to fall back, exposing bare arms. The dark fingers splayed for her inspection. Five on each hand.

"Mayva, you and I don't belong here with these pitiful creatures."

Again the images rushed through her mind. The city flaming at sunset on the mountain top, Shen kissing her cheek beneath a tree whose leaves were carved from jewels, someone speaking in a high arched room. Her eyes filled with tears and she clung to Shen's outstretched hands.

"Why is it so difficult to remember?"

"Perhaps if we had remembered, we would not have stayed."

She stared at Shen as the sun came up behind her and sat like a fur cape on her shoulders. The little wind of dawn had subsided, and in the distance the desert had begun to shimmer as if it were underwater. He led her aside from the road to a place where boulders crouched beside a dry stream bed like a group of mutants gathered to beg. He spoke to her in a voice that trembled on the edge of great pain.

"We were mindwiped, Mayva, you and I and the others scattered in villages and settlements across this doomed land. They took away our memory of who we were and where we came from, and left us each only one skill. Yours was a knowledge of healing, mine of building."

Once again he displayed the five-fingered hands, and she saw the calluses on them this time. She recognized the truth in his words, though she could not have said them herself.

"There was someone who had an idea," she said slowly, creasing her brow in the effort to remember. "How long have we been here?"

"A very long time!" he said.

This too was true. How many times had the little moon grown full and wasted away again since the time she had walked out of the desert? How many times had the insufficient rains blown out of the west in their season? A very long time.

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"I feel as if I have been wandering in a nightmare for too long."

Shen laughed, splintering the morning quietness. "Spoken like one of us!"

"But who are we?"

His laughter stopped. "I don't know. There are things I still can't remember. Damn them! They did a magnificent job on our minds." He looked intently at her. "But the fact that we remember anything despite their mindwiping proves we must be very strong. We can recapture the rest, Mayva, if we try."

She let the thoughts flow easily into her mind this time, not grasping any, letting them settle into their own constellations. It was as if she had been unchained and given the sky to fly in. The image startled her. She stared at Shen.

"Where were you going when I met you?"

"Home," he said simply.

The word roared in her ears like the noise of a great waterfall. A river of memory came rushing toward her, knocking away the wall that separated her from the knowledge of herself, lighting up her mind with a thousand simultaneous pictures. She saw the ship-city perched in the clouds on the high mountaintop, golden at sunset; she heard the hum of its life support system, endlessly renewing itself and the life within the metal walls. She saw the vaulted rooms, the silver floors, the artificial trees with a whole world's treasure for fruit; she heard the lilt of harp and flute, caught the glimmer of thousands of tiny lights floating in a ballroom where the citizens took their ease, saw the flash and sparkle of luminous gowns and opalescent cloaks passing on a wide glass stair.

Home.

She stood up. "Let's go home."

"Do you know where to find it?"

She smiled. "It's in the sunset."

Together, hand in hand, they walked away from the villages, leaving the path behind and striking out across the open desert. Now that they had remembered who they were, it seemed that the ferocious heat could not touch them. The twisted landscape swam in browns and ambers, but they walked as if through a cool forest.

Once she stopped and gazed into Shen's dark eyes.

"Do you remember yet *why?*"

He shook his head. "A jest? A trial? Perhaps a punishment?"

She looked startled at that. "No, though for a moment—"

They walked on.

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"Someone was speaking," she said as they crossed a dry lake and the heat rose up in waves from the sand. "Someone had an idea. It's no use. I don't remember."

"Don't try," he advised.

Shortly before midday, they heard a cry and, turning, saw a cloud of dust rising behing them.

"We're being pursued," Shen said.

Now in the dust she could see figures carrying staves and axes, hobbling and loping after them like creatures in a bad dream. The heavy air shattered with their raucous cries, and the echoes of their hate reverberated among the misshapen rocks.

"Monsters!" Shen cried.

He extended his hand toward them suddenly, then dropped it slowly, his face puzzled, as though he had forgotten the rest of it. His eyes searched Mayva's for the answer. But if she had remembered it, she knew it would not have been the right way.

"Run," she said, tugging her skirt above her knees. "They won't dare follow us far. They fear the desert."

Shen threw back his cloak, and they ran on strong, straight legs. Her mind balked at the easy assignment of words to objects, but still she felt that truth lay behind a closed door. They ran, and the sounds of pursuit fell away in the distance, until at last, breathless, they knew they were safe.

At sunset they came in view of the foothills that marked the beginning of the rise toward the high range of mountains on the western horizon. From this point, the land sloped relentlessly upward like a cracked and broken table tipped on its side. It was harder now to make progress, for the heat pressed down like a shield, holding them back. The sun began to slide faster down the sky, and the cloudwrack on the peaks flamed scarlet and gold. And as they looked, the outline of the starship emerged from the clouds, its domes and spires wreathed in mist so that it was difficult to tell where the clouds ended and the ship began.

"I remember our coming," he said in a low, tense voice. "I remember the darkness of space between, the emptiness of time on the voyage."

She shivered despite the late afternoon's lingering heat. The sunlight reflected on the clouds darkened briefly, and the ship grew indistinct.

"There was another ship," Mayva said. 'There was a battle."

Shen answered her fiercely. "The planet was ours! We found it. We'd searched for so long."

"So had they. And their need was as great as ours."

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"Don't think of that now," he advised. "Save your strength till we get home."

They climbed in silence as the vision ahead grew clearer. But she could not rid herself of the thoughts that crowded one upon the other. Every step opened another door and let them in. Time had passed too slowly by the shining wall. The beautiful faces had been bored. There had been an idea. A voice. It was so long ago.

Darkness came creeping across the desert, and still they climbed. Stars leaped in fire above their heads, and the tiny moon crept shyly out from behind a drift of cloud. Their own had been so much bigger and more bold, she remembered.

Toward midnight, when the liquid fire of the home galaxy tilted directly overhead, they came to a narrow ledge before a vertical rock wall, into which was set a metal door. Shen set his palm flat against an engraved circle in the middle of the door. It swung silently open, admitting them to a room carved in the rock, filled with pale yellow light that cast no shadows. The door slid shut behind them, and a faint hum of distant machinery began. The air shimmered, and a slight sparkle rose before them as if someone had sprinkled a handful of luminous dust. The column of bright motes coalesced into a pillar of light, which took shape. A woman stepped out, tossing back her brilliant cloak to reveal a clinging, diaphanous gown that seemed spun out of particles of light. She held out jeweled arms, and her bright laughter chimed like a bell in the rock chamber.

"Welcome home! You stayed longer than all the others."

Shen was already in the woman's embrace, but in Mayva's mind the door swung wide, allowing memories to crowd upon her.

"Will they concede defeat, Dema?" Shen asked, laughing.

"Teleren has already ordered the feast!" she replied.

She held out her hand to include Mayva in the welcoming, but Mayva held back.

"It was an accident," Mayva said. "We did not mean to harm this planet's people. We did not intend them to suffer as they did." How lightly they had always taken such things!

"Let it go now, Mayva," Shen said. "We're home."

Home. Inside the ship-city, their home, there was no pain, no deformity, no sorrow or loss, only music and feasting and endless pleasure. Inside the city there had been an idea, a game. But there had been a voice too that spoke of guilt. And she remembered whose voice it had been.

"I'm not going with you."

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"Are you mad?" Shen asked. "I remember it all now. We wagered on it, to pass the time. The mindwipe was a kindness, so we could bear the unspeakable horror. But we don't have to stay once we remember. Those were the rules!"

"It was no game for me, Shen," she said. "It was our fault it happened to them. They were innocent victims, caught like animals in the crossfire of our battle. They had been human once, like us, and we made monsters of them."

"You've done your share of helping them," Dema said. In Dema's eyes she saw neither love nor hate, only the cool dispassion of those who have lived a very long time, journeyed a very long way. "You were always too emotional, Mayva."

"They don't concern us," Shen said. "They're ignorant and brutish, and they aren't going to change. Perhaps it would have been kinder to finish them when we destroyed the other ship."

She thought of Bryn, only the bloodmarked face linking him to his people. "But they *can* change. We can lead them back to being men."

"We're bound by the Code not to interfere," Dema said. "You know that, Mayva. No world may deliberately use its knowledge to change the course of evolution of another. That's why you were only allowed to take such rudimentary skills with you in the game."

"We changed their world the day we came to it!" she argued. "Our war changed their history. We would be justified in changing it back."

"An interesting point," Dema conceded. "The Elders will be glad to debate it with you."

Mayva thought of the endless discussions, the brilliant concepts threaded like shining beads on a string to pass the years. They too were a game. It was not enough.

"We deserve to come home," Shen said.

Where is home, she thought, but the place where the work is, and the love?

"Goodbye, Shen-Who-Once-Loved-Me," she said. "I'm going back."

She turned and touched her hand to the door. As it opened, revealing the deformed and barren land lying at the foot of the mountain, bathed in pale radiance from the planet's tiny satellite, she heard Dema's bright laughter. The perfection of music from the ship drifted down to her. This time, she would remember that, and a lot more.

She could not go back to Ruk's village; she had done all she

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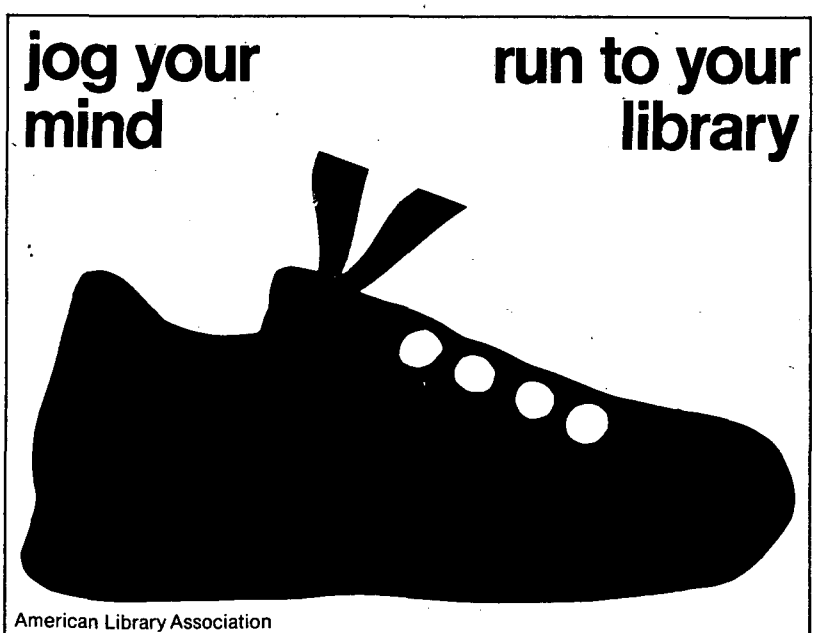
could for them. But there were other villages, other men in whose hearts she could plant seeds that would blossom into remembrance of their lost humanity. There was so much to do, and so little time to do it in. She would need an apprentice, one who loved her and followed her ways. And she knew where to find him.

It was a long way home. ●



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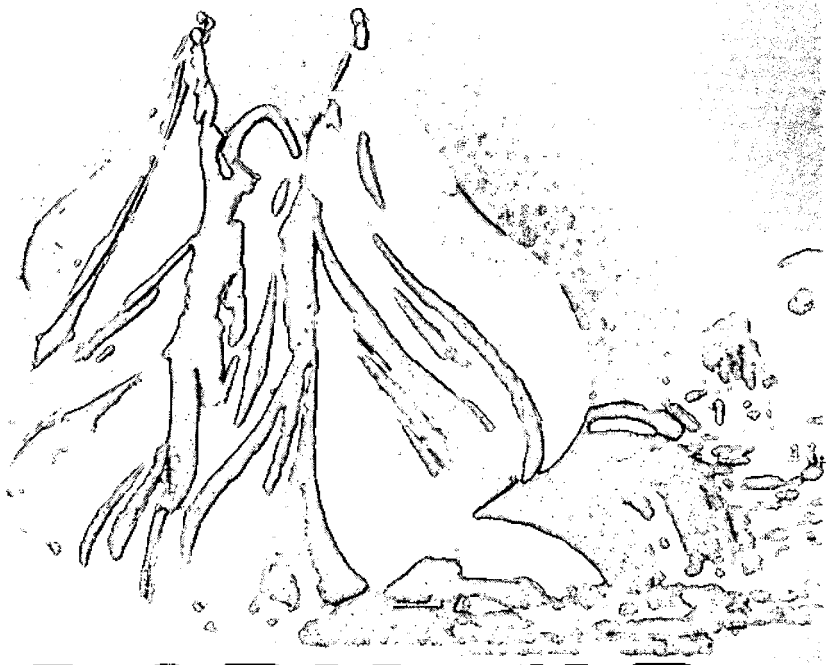
Glen Cook's *The Swordbearer* has just been published by Timescape, for whom he's also finishing up two new novels in his "Dread Empire" series. Meanwhile, *Shadowline*, the first of a new trilogy, has just been published by Warner Books.

art: Val Lakey/Artifact



DARKWAR

by Glen Cook

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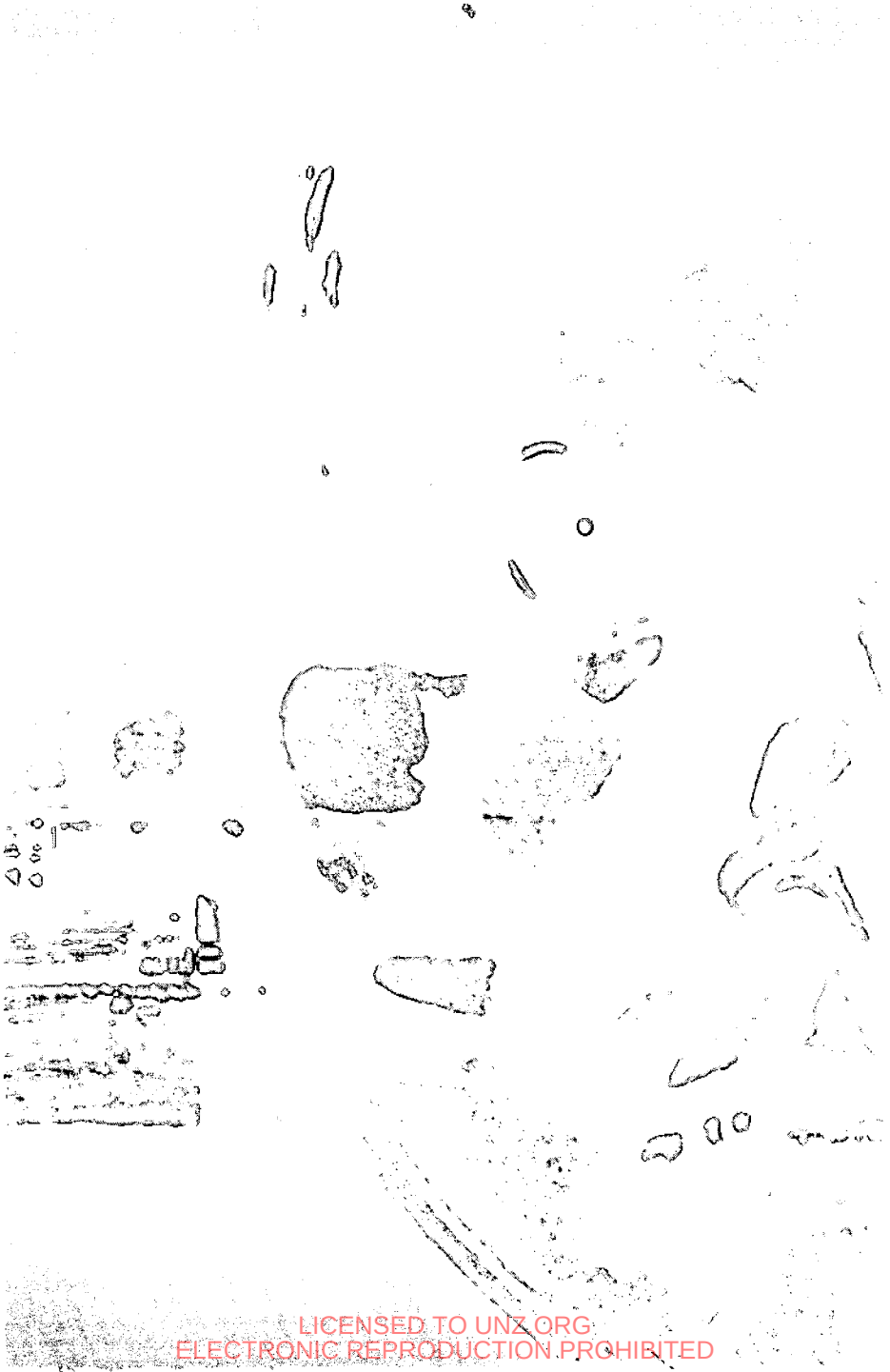

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Three figures glided through an empty night street. Moonlight twinkled off the medals and tunic buttons of the tallest. There was a gentle tinkle as she moved. The smaller two made no sound at all. They were silth sisters, sorceresses, trained to the ways of the dark. The tall female, Kerath Hadon, knew that they trailed her only because she had asked them to do so.

A remote flash brightened the quiet street. Kerath glanced up. For a moment she saw only three moons. The smallest had an orbital motion perceptible to the eye.

Razor slashes of coherent light ripped the velvet sky, come and gone so fast she actually saw only afterimages. "Another strike at *Frostflyer* and *Dreamkeeper*," Kerath said.

Her companions said nothing. One may have nodded. These silth wasted no words. Kerath shivered. They spooked her. "Come. Let's get this done while we still have a few ships left."

A series of flashes illuminated the city, revealing crumbling old walls recently whitewashed in defiance of the doom overhanging the Meth homeworld, filling gothic aches with shadows, silhouetting distant onion domes. Kerath snarled, "Suslov is serious tonight. Here." She tapped a sagging door. It opened. A gray-whiskered male poked his muzzle into the rippling light, his eyes flashing golden.

"You?"

"Yes, it's me, Shadar. Wouldn't you know it? Is the High Lord here?"

"Waiting impatiently, Marshall. Off the street before you're seen."

Kerath pushed inside. Her shadows followed, two dark ghosts. Shadar led them through two rooms, to the foot of a stair. "Up there. Kerath? Marshall? Good luck."

"No luck involved, Shadar. Strictly fiat. But thank you." She touched his hand gently.

A moment later she stood in the doorway of a brightly lighted room. A half-dozen males with gray whiskers and ragged fur stared at her with tight eyes and tighter lips. Kerath flashed teeth. Folgar suspected. She stepped inside. "I thought this would be private, High Lord."

The eldest male flexed muscles still powerful despite gnawing age. "The circumstances suggested some unpleasant possibilities. You'll understand my urge to include reliable witnesses, Marshall." His teeth showed mockingly.

Kerath's ears tilted forward and down, the Meth equivalent of a sneer. The presence of his henchmen would do Folgar no good.

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"You and your packmates have destroyed the Meth, High Lord. The people are sick of alien ways, and even more sick of endless defeat." Kerath gestured toward the doorway. "The Meth might welcome the return of old ways."

A low rumble started deep in a half-dozen throats, an unconscious warning sound from males who saw their territories threatened. "Why are those silth witches here?" one demanded.

"Marshall?" Folgar asked. He concealed his emotions well, for a male.

Kerath drew herself to her straightest. She knew she made an imposing figure, a hero of the Meth, well marked with medals and scars. She even wore the white cuff badge of Snow-No-More, a defeat that fewer than a hundred Meth had survived. "For three generations your all-male party has held the power, High Lord. What have you done with it? You have harried the silth. Slain their greatest. And you have made the Meth into bumbling imitations of the humans you admire." She had rehearsed the message often, but her delivery was not going well. She did not *feel* it.

Folgar nodded. "To the point, Marshall. The Command had something in mind when they sent you."

Kerath would not be hurried. "You set aside the old ways, the old truths, the old knowledge. You made mock of millennia of tradition. You made the Meth a reflection of Man. Then you tried to usurp the humans. What has it profited you? What has it gained the Meth?"

Folgar stared stonily. His companions watched the silth warily, frightened, as if faced by something returned from the grave.

"Our worlds are lost. Our greatest warships are debris scattered among the stars. Our best fighters lie in iron coffins far in the bitter cold of the deep. We retain only that speck of space inside Biter's orbit. *Frostflyer* and *Dreamkeeper* are our last heavy ships. We have become prisoners upon our homeworld, awaiting the fall of a monstrous hammer. We are helpless to turn away the asteroid Suslov sends to shatter our world."

"He won't bring it all the way in," Folgar countered.

"He will if he must. I know Pyotr Suslov, High Lord. He doesn't bluff. But, of course, your contention is correct insofar as you know. You have been arranging a secret surrender."

Folgar's ears flicked in surprise.

"The Command knows." Kerath did not conceal her contempt. "Male treachery. It's always with us. You started this war, and

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now you mean to sell the Meth simply so you can retain power when the fighting stops."

"Now, Marshall . . . "

"The Meth would drink your blood if they saw the Command's tapes of your communications with Suslov."

"Are you threatening me, Marshall?"

"This is the message from the Command. There will be no surrender. The Meth will die as they have always lived: without dishonor. If the asteroid cannot be turned, so be it. May the All forfend."

"Marshall—" Folgar's ears were back now, in fighting position.

"The Command will take appropriate steps if you have any further contact with Suslov."

"This is rebellion."

Kerath admitted it. "The Armed Force is the source of all power, Folgar. It no longer supports you. It is assuming direction of the war effort."

"Why are *they* with you?" Loathing and hatred edged Folgar's voice as he indicated the silth.

"We fought your way, the way that imitates humans. We failed. Now we turn to the ways of our foremothers."

The old males growled. A chair overturned. Someone dropped a bottle. The stink of male fear filled the room.

"Darkwar?" Folgar asked.

"Darkwar."

"But the old darkships were scrapped. Nor are there trained silth crews anymore."

Kerath revealed the points of her teeth. "Wrong on both counts. The silth have ships you never found. The legendary Ceremony darkships. And sisters who escaped your hunters. End of message from the Command."

Folgar growled, but there was a touch of fear in his defiance.

Kerath turned away. "Come," she told the silth.

Shadar awaited her at the foot of the stair. "You did well."

Kerath nodded. "I thought so."

"Good luck again, Marshall." Shadar touched her arm.

Kerath paused to hug the Meth who had sired her, before pushing into the street.

The sky was quiet. The orbital skirmish had ended. *Frostflyer* and *Dreamkeeper* still radiated the glow of active energy screens. They had survived again.

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II

Kerath was uneasy in the company of the silth, though she concealed it well. Her adult life had run in tracks prescribed by Folgar's ilk. These sorceresses were anachronisms, shadows of ideas long outdated. Facing down Folgar's scruffy pack was one thing; believing that the Command was doing right was quite another.

She pushed off a bulkhead, floated across the lighter's cabin, checked the harnesses of her companions. "Rendezvous with *Dreamkeeper* in fifteen minutes." They looked at her with fathomless eyes, saying nothing.

They were so young to be so spooky. They never spoke. That was unnerving. But they had to be good. Littermates, they had been chosen Mistresses of the Ships over any others of the surviving silth. It was said they were as filled with the dark strength as the great silth of old, when darkwar decided the destiny of the Meth.

Did the Command want those grim days to return from shadow? Folgar was a fool, yes, but he was right when he claimed the Meth were better off for having shed the yoke of the silth.

Docking alarm sounded. Overhead speakers relayed crisp instructions. The crew was trying to impress the oncoming Marshall.

Kerath needed no impressing. *Dreamkeeper* sprang from the same core of honor as she. The ship was a survivor.

She released her charges. "Follow me."

An honor guard waited aboard the warship. Kerath accepted their accolade but told the ship's commander, "Don't waste any more energy on protocol. My companions are cargo, and I don't need it."

"As you will, Marshall. Let me show you to your quarters."

"Have the other personnel arrived?"

The commander glanced back. The silth stalked them like wicked shadows. The boots of Kerath and the commander rang on the gray-painted steel decks. The two in black seemed to glide a whisker above the plating. "They're here. Have you noticed the quiet?"

"I noted a distinct lack of curiosity."

"The crew is staying out of the way. The first group distressed them. Now you bring Mistresses of the Ships. "They're frightened."

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Kerath showed a glimpse of teeth. "They have cause, Commander. *I* wouldn't be here had I not been directed."

"When you were a whelp, did they tell you tales about the grauken?"

"Did they? My older brothers tried to convince our litter that he lived under our bed." The grauken was a shape-changing night monster fond of delicate young flesh, an archetype born during primitive winters, when desperate packs resorted to cannibalism to survive, luring or capturing the young of other packs.

"Seeing the silth aboard my ship gives me the feeling I'd have if I did find the grauken under my bed."

"I know," Kerath said. "How well I know."

"These are our guests' quarters," the commander said, halting before a door. He tapped. The door slid open a crack. "Sisters?" He indicated the two figures in black.

Kerath caught a glimpse of the cabin as the two entered. The darkness was barely broken by red light. Shapes in black sat motionless. A terrible bittersweet odor rolled out, offending Kerath's nostrils.

The door clumped shut.

"The grauken's den," the commander observed. "They're calling it that already. I hope the Command knows what it's doing."

"So do I, Commander. So do I. I don't think I could go on if I thought my efforts would facilitate a silth rebirth."

"Nor I. I suppose we must have faith that the Command can neutralize them once they have served their purpose."

"Are we ready to space?"

"Programmed for jump. *Frostflyer* should be moving up to cover our drive ports. Whenever you give the order, Marshall."

"Then show me my quarters. I'll shift uniforms and join you on the bridge."

III

"Ready on *Frostflyer*, Marshall."

"Ready here, Marshall," the ship's commander said.

Kerath stared into the situation display tank. The humans were shifting their dispositions. Suslov had noted *Frostflyer*'s change of station. "They anticipate a strike at the asteroid."

"As they would say, it's in the cards," the commander replied. "They would see that as our only remaining option."

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"A weak one, though. If we reshape the collision orbit, they'll just warp another hunk of rock into the same groove."

"In that light, what we're doing here doesn't make much sense either."

"No. I suspect the Command just wants to scare them into backing off." Kerath studied the proposed track of the warships. It feinted toward the incoming asteroid, then curved out of the system. "It should work. They should be rushing one way when we jump the other."

"And then what?"

"It's hoped they'll assume we've been sent out as commerce raiders. If we shake loose, they'll concentrate on guarding their shipping lanes."

"That's the book?"

Kerath revealed a little tooth. "That's the book. Let's hope Pyotr Suslov buys it. Go when ready, Commander."

It looked book for a while. But when *Frostflyer* and *Dreamkeeper* turned, human warships responded immediately. Kerath studied the tank. "Two main battles and a heavy chaser. Suslov hedged his bets." She turned suddenly, sensing a difference, a change of energy in the air.

Two silth had come onto the narrow balcony overlooking the fighting bridge: the two she had brought aboard. They remained out of the way, observing, but their chill filled the compartment.

"Coming up to first jump," the commander said. "And two. And one. And jump." The tank blanked. The fringes of the universe folded in. Bulkheads melted and crawled. Meth wavered like dancing flames. Kerath glanced at the silth. *They* remained rocks of blackness.

Real space clicked into place.

The tank began to assemble a portrait from data retrieved by the ship's exterior sensors. "*Frostflyer* is with us, right on station."

Kerath stared into the tank, watching starpoints wink into being, willing it not to show anything red.

"One counter. Two counter. Three counter. They stayed with us, Marshall."

"I see them, Commander. Next jump."

The stars changed thrice more. Three times the human trackers came through behind them. "They're good," Kerath observed. "Really good."

"Suggestions, Marshall?"

"They were ragged that go. The chaser was a half-minute late. Perhaps it's a cumulative error."

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"We have only four jumps to shake them, Marshall."

"Continue, Commander."

Next jump the humans translated even more raggedly, arriving over a span of a full minute. Kerath sighed. Time to act. "Commander, Mission Officer to *Frostflyer*. Turn and attack after next drop. Lead them away. Head for home the long way."

The commander stared at her for several seconds before relaying the order.

The ships jumped, and dropped. *Frostflyer* charged toward where the humans were expected to appear. Kerath glared at the tank.

The first human ship appeared directly in *Frostflyer*'s path. The tank showed a great deal of weaponry action.

A second ship dropped. And then the first vanished.

"Ha!" a tech cried. "Got one!"

"Or it jumped out," Kerath whispered to herself, watching *Frostflyer* curve toward the newcomer.

The chaser arrived as the commander ordered the next jump. When translation was complete, Kerath suggested, "Hold the next jump. Let's see if they come through after us. Better to fight them here than around the target."

The commander observed, "It won't much matter now, will it? They've followed long enough to know we're not headed toward any commerce lane. If they bring in a fleet on our line of flight . . . "

"But it'll take days, or even weeks, to find us. That should be time enough."

Nothing appeared on *Dreamkeeper*'s backtrail. After waiting an hour, Kerath ordered the journey resumed.

Much, much later, as the ship cruised that section of space approximating its destination, she directed, "Secure to quarters, Commander. Standard watches. We'll begin searching after we've rested."

"Very well, Marshall."

The silth were at the hatchway when Kerath departed. She thought their eyes looked feverish in the subdued lighting. She nodded greeting and started to slip past.

A hand touched her elbow. She stopped as if she had encountered an iron bar. A whisper said, "The steel ship, *Frostflyer*, is no more. Two alien ships lighted its path into darkness. The third is injured. It limps back to its base. We tell you, that those with kin aboard *Frostflyer* might begin mourning in timely fashion."

"Yes. Thank you." Kerath shook off the staying hand and

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rushed to her quarters. For half an hour she sat rubbing fingers over her personal sidearm. The action had a calming effect.

She had ordered *Frostflyer*, half the fleet-in-being, half the surviving might of the Meth, to its death.

Her sleep was filled with terrible dreams, haunted by dry, withered old bitches flying on black wings. Last hope of the Meth. The Command had given its trust into the wrong hands.

IV

"Coming up now, Commander."

Kerath and the ship's commander leaned over a vidtech's shoulders, peering into her screen. "Searchlights," the commander ordered.

Immediately something flashed out in the darkness. "There," Kerath gasped. "More light."

Several lights concentrated on the target. Gradually, parts became visible.

"Darkship," the commander breathed. "They really still exist. The Ceremony legend is true."

Kerath nodded, unable to avert her gaze from that ghost out of the far past, when disputes between silth sisterhoods were settled by combats between Mistresses of the Ships far in the black heart of space. The darkship didn't look like a ship at all, just a giant titanium girderwork dagger marked with mysterious symbols.

The darkship sprang from an era when sisterhoods formed associations human translators still confused with nations, corporations, and even families. The competition for control of the wealth of the stars had been savage, till silth-run merchanters had encountered humans, with their contagious alien ways and unshakable disbelief. The ensuing confusion among the silth had allowed their overthrow, and hatred of their long tyranny had led to merciless slaughter, witchhunts that persisted yet, and overreactive tilts toward the new human ideas.

"It needs a lot of repair," the commander observed.

"Supposed to be twelve of them," Kerath replied. "The legend is, they chose to meet and die a ritual death here rather than go home and submit to the will of the new order. We'll choose the best preserved."

The silth had other ideas. They wanted to locate specific ships.

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"The spells of our foremothers guard them still," said the one who did the talking. "Only those two will be accessible to us."

Kerath frowned. That might mean troublesome delays. "You're the experts," she said, grudging them every extra minute.

Two days went into locating the right ships. They had drifted apart over the centuries. One of the two had sustained considerable damage.

Kerath worried. Suslov would be on the hunt. She did not want to waste time making repairs. The silth ignored her protests. They led their shadowy sisters out and went to work. There was nothing Kerath could do to hurry or help them, or to alter their perception of the way things should be done.

Kerath was sleeping when an orderly came with the commander's request that she join her on the bridge.

"Thought you'd want to see this, Marshall." The commander indicated a screen. "They've got one moving. There's not a hint of drive, but it's moving."

Kerath surveyed the detection boards. The commander was right. The darkship appeared only on visual and radar. She stared at the titanium dagger. It was receding toward distant stars. A vague glow surrounded it. "She's getting the feel of it. The old stories say they glowed too brightly to look at."

The commander nodded. Then she gasped, "Where did it go? Radar. Where is that target?"

"Gone, Commander. I'm not getting anything . . . Wait. Here it is. Nadir, thirty-five degrees, range fifteen."

Kerath exchanged glances with the commander. "Through the Up-and-Over," she murmured. "She's found her demons."

"So that's true too." The commander looked frightened. "Witches. You know, I didn't really believe this before."

Kerath stared at the empty screen. "I didn't either, Commander. Not down deep in my heart." She began to grow a little frightened too.

V

Fifth day on station. The second darkship had completed repairs. Both crews were outside learning to handle their ships. Kerath thought practice seemed unnecessary. "They appear to have been born to it," she said.

The commander growled, "They are, aren't they?"

Kerath's ears tilted slightly, expressing mild amusement. The

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silth claimed to possess the memories of all their foremothers. Watching these sisters ride their darkships, she was inclined to discard former doubts.

"Do they have names?" the commander asked.

"The silth? I don't know. I see. You can't keep them straight. Neither can I."

"One is faster than the other. I'd like some way to differentiate before we go into rehearsal."

Kerath's hackles rose slightly. She checked the time. In half an hour she would be out there herself, riding a darkship during the first mock attack. *Dreamkeeper* would play alien, its technicians searching for weaknesses Suslov could exploit.

Kerath was not sure why she was going out. An observer run was not essential to her mission. But she had been invited by the Mistresses of the Ships. Acceptance seemed politic.

Fear stalked her like a shadow that disappeared when she turned, like the grauken sliding out from under the far side of the bed as she bent down to look for it. The silth had reasons for being here that had nothing to do with saving the Meth homeworld. That would be incidental to their accomplishment of their true ambitions.

Seconds and minutes rolled past. Kerath watched the tank and screens and hoped they would forget her. Out there *she* would be the powerless minority, unable to call for help. She turned. "Commander, there's a hole in this thing. Darkships were meant to fight alone, against other darkships. They could smell each other in vacuum. But how will they find a human ship? How will they handle unexpected changes? This is going to be an attack by rote."

The commander nodded. "I was going to suggest we throw some kinks into the later maneuvers, to test their flexibility. Lack of flexibility broke them back when. They couldn't cope with the flood of novel ideas that came after meeting the humans. They couldn't shed roles programmed by their foremothers."

"I'll mention that to the silth."

"In a way, I feel sorry for them. Time has passed them by."

"Perhaps." Kerath glanced at the screen. A darkship was docking. "They didn't forget me. Wish me luck."

The Mistress of the Ship met her in docking bay. She had brought her darkship inside. It floated free, ignoring *Dreamkeeper*'s artificial gravity. Fresh, updated symbols had been painted on the titanium beams. A variety of new mystical hardware had been installed. Overall, the darkship looked new.

Kerath opened a locker to secure an eva suit.

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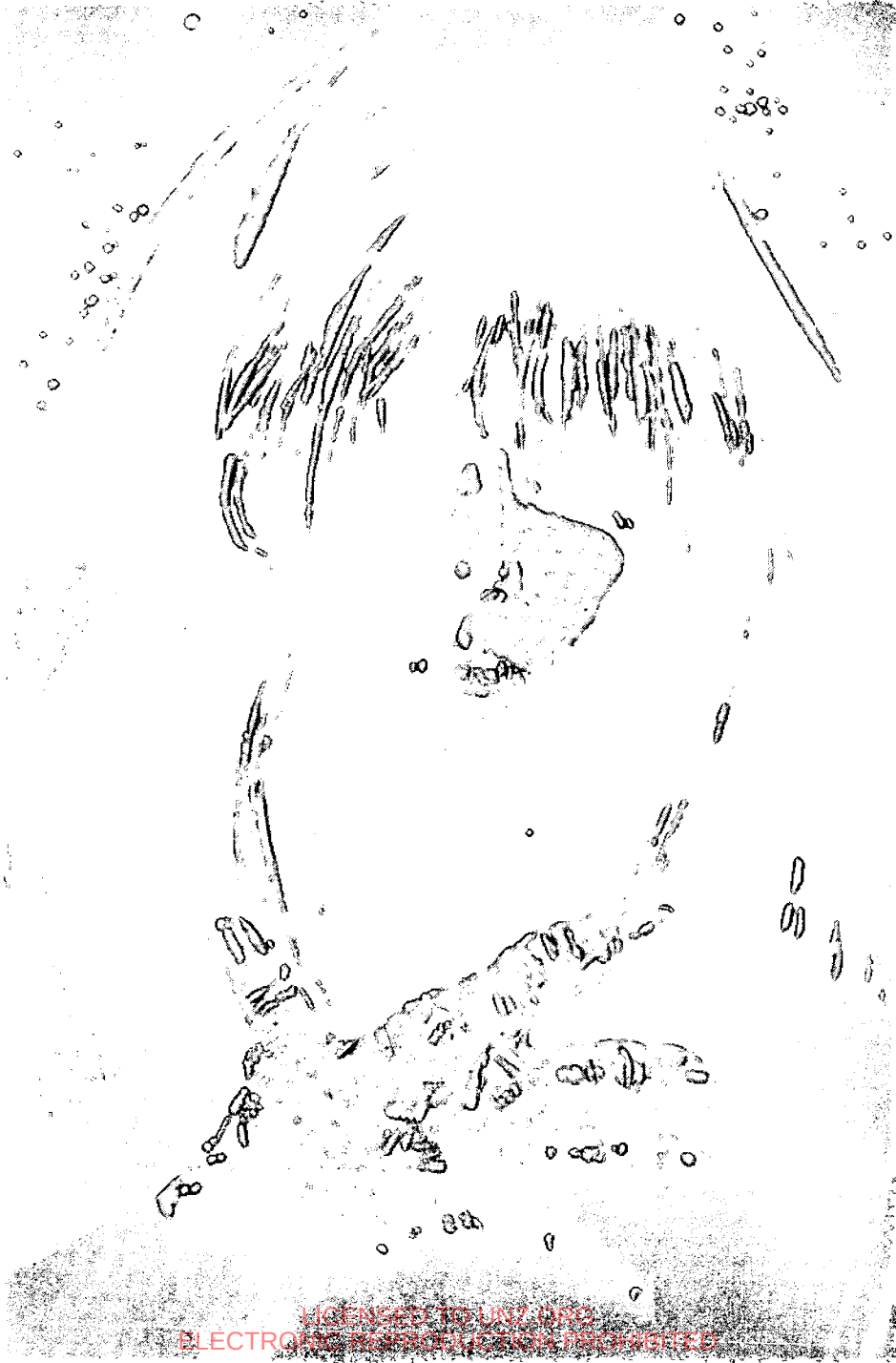

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"No, Marshall. No artifacts. You alone, naked."

Kerath bared her teeth. "No."

"We wish you to partake of the silth experience. We wish you to meet those-who-dwell."

"That's your problem. If you really want me to make the fly, do it on my terms."

"No."

"Compromise?" Kerath thought the female's eyes flared for an instant. Silth did not compromise. "I want my clothing and my communicator."

"Clothing is neither dignity nor worth, Marshall."

"Then shed yours, silth."

The female's eyes flared. "Very well. Set your communicator to receive only. We wish you to concentrate on the experience, not what to report."

"Agreed."

The Mistress glided away. Kerath followed. The silth was angry. She stepped heavily enough to be heard.

The Mistress led her to the axis of the titanium dagger. "Stand here. This is the traditional Place of the Mother in combats to determine the fates of sisterhoods in blood feud. Fear not. A dome of power will shield you from the breath of the All." The silth left her and took her own station at the tip of the longest arm of the cross. Riding the point of the dagger, Kerath thought.

"Marshall?" Another silth held out a silver bowl filled with an amber liquid. Kerath had seen the sisters sip from similar bowls before each of their trips outside. Shakily, she took the bowl and drank.

"More," the sister said.

Kerath drank.

"More . . . Enough. Yes. I think that's enough."

Kerath felt lightheaded. Her eyeballs felt prickly.

The silth took the bowl to each of the stations, then assumed her own place at the tip of one of the dagger's arms.

Kerath became aware of microscopic points of light around her. She caught hints of similar phenomena surrounding the other females. The phenomena grew more pronounced as *Dreamkeeper* evacuated the atmosphere from the bay.

The bay door opened. Naked stars stared in. Kerath felt only a slight moment of chill; then the golden points redoubled in intensity.

The darkship turned, pointed toward the stars—then stabbed toward them at screaming speed. Kerath felt no inertial drag.

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She turned and saw the rectangular lighted bay shrink with incredible rapidity. This was impossible. Even more impossible, her fur rippled as if in a strong wind.

Dreamkeeper shrank to a point and vanished.

She was alone among the stars, standing in space. She could not see the darkship. Her companions were golden columns that looked more like distant star clusters than nearby phenomena. She was alone, and frightened as she had never been frightened before. Something burned in her veins. Her head spun. Her eyes would not track. The amber drink? Strange, colored things crawled round the edge of her vision.

Had they poisoned her? No. They had drunk from the same bowl. Suddenly it became clear, a whole different view of the darkful deep between the stars, a view of a chill filled with color and life. Life? Life was impossible out here . . .

A swarm of a million bright little deltoid darts drifted toward her, slowly shifting color from yellow through red and back again, in perfect unison. They sensed the darkship suddenly. As one they turned white, flipped around, and streaked away. They moved almost faster than the eye could track.

There were little things, big things, even bigger things. Some crowded the darkship, curious. Some remained indifferent. Some fled. A few cruised with the ship, seeming to pull it along. Those were the demons of legend, Kerath decided. The demons the silth summoned and commanded to carry their darkships through the Up-and-Over.

In her wonder she forgot her fear. "Oh!" Fear returned a dozenfold. But why? It was nothing. Just a dust cloud obscuring a few stars. Wasn't it?

The stars rotated around her. Vaguely, she sensed the approach of the second darkship. The creatures of color shuddered and made way, slithering over and around one another like a nest of serpents. Four columns of witchfire took station to Kerath's right. The entire second ship began to glow. Ahead of Kerath, her Mistress of the Ship caught fire. The stars began to rock. Moving again, Kerath thought. The things of color—those-who-dwell, in silth parlance—scattered. So fast!

The universe turned inside out. Horrible things clawed and howled at her. "Up-and-Over!" she screamed. The silth had conjured them into the Up-and-Over, where the darkship dagger hurtled faster than light. She screamed again as *Dreamkeeper*'s lights appeared for a second, so close she could almost touch them.

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And she screamed once more as the darkship returned to the Up-and-Over.

Drifting. Shaking. *Dreamkeeper* a few light-seconds away. A voice in her ear. It was several seconds before she could concentrate on the message. "Impressive, Marshall, but abort the drill. I say again, abort the drill. We have unfriendly company. Get aboard fast."

Get aboard? How was the Mistress of the Ship to know? No! She couldn't. But she found her feet moving of their own volition, carrying her forward. The commander kept chattering in her ear, telling her how close the enemy was. In half a minute she was at the tip of the dagger. Her shielding melded with that of the silth. "Enemy ship, Mistress," she gasped. "Only a light-minute away, right on a line with our sun. We have to get back aboard *Dreamkeeper*."

The Mistress bobbed her head, asked a few questions. Then she said, "Back to your position."

The return trek seemed far longer. She finished it with a bad feeling gnawing her gut.

VI

The darkship began to glow. Round it those-who-dwell scattered. They seemed suddenly two-dimensional, bright paper cutouts imbued with panic, flickering toward silent stars. Only the silth's driver creatures remained, stretching and rolling, straining as they dragged the darkship.

Kerath glanced upward. A chill seized her. That dark dust-cloud thing hovered overhead, obscuring different constellations.

The darkships became a pair of fiery daggers hurtling toward nowhere. The universe twisted and folded and opened its evil belly and gave birth to a horde of silently screaming horrors. They had gone into the Up-and-Over. Kerath screamed back. They weren't supposed to do this.

Normal space exploded around her. She caught a half-second glimpse of a human warship, long and lean and deadly, its riders already running free. *Dreamkeeper* had been spotted!

Cold blackness enveloped her. She could not see her sisters on the darkship. She felt their fear, felt the Mistress waver. The stench of death stung her nostrils. Something that felt like the damp at the bottom of a grave crawled over her protective shielding. In her mind she heard the first of a thousand death cries . . .

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Twist. Fold. The Up-and-Over. A distinct feeling of hard deceleration, a twinge of fear. Something was wrong with the Mistress. The darkship was out of control. *Dreamkeeper* was swelling ahead, docking bay ablaze with light. "Too fast!" Kerath cried. "Slow down!" Her ears folded forward. She sank to all fours, sure she was about to die.

What a waste, to end it all here. *Dreamkeeper* would be crippled, and the Meth could no longer manage major repairs. She had failed, and would not live to see the final consequences.

She was right and she was wrong. The darkship continued its deceleration, lowering its daggertip slowly. In a flicker the warship swelled, rose . . . they were going to make it! They were going to slide beneath it.

The shock of an earthquake hit her. The titanium girderwork ripped, tore, screamed in the silence of the big chill. Kerath clung to the metal. The stars twirled. And then they went out.

She awakened in her quarters. The ship's commander appeared almost immediately, her face grave. "I told you one of them was slow."

"How bad was it?"

"The darkship was a total loss. An arm torn off. One of the silth is dead. *Dreamkeeper* lost a main vent stack. It's not serious as long as we don't have to face heavy particle beam fire."

"One darkship left to complete the mission. Maybe we should abort."

"I don't think so."

"Commander?"

"You'd have to see the human ship to understand." The commander paced, made several false starts before saying, "The old darkwar legends understate. I say send the fast one in and hope the humans get her before she gets all of them. She might have impact enough to encourage a negotiated peace."

"I don't understand, Commander."

"You haven't seen that ship. There may be futures worse than surrender. Would the silth be forgiving if they returned to power?"

"No."

"When you visit the human ship, remember that you're looking at enemies of the silth. The ancient mothers confined darkwar to their high duels in deep space, but it *could* be used against a world. The Command made a grave mistake. The silth offered a straw to grasp, and they grabbed it without looking for the trap. These are new, young Mistresses of the Ships, probably bred and

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trained for a mission like this. The silth claim to see the future. If they really do, then they would have foreseen desperate times and would have prepared Mistresses like these. If just one survived, with her ship, the silth would win their gamble. They would return."

"You're uncommonly emotional today, Commander."

"I saw the enemy ship. See it yourself. All else will follow.

She had nightmares every time she slept. The human ship had been that grim. The dead had looked as though they had been torn apart from within, or as though they had tortured themselves to death slowly. Just what the silth would wish on their enemies. A lot of Meth would go the same way if the silth had their day.

Kerath studied the rehearsal runs of the surviving darkship. The Mistress of the Ship was superb. She never gave *Dreamkeeper*'s weapons people time to track, train, and fire. And unlike her failed sister, she had no trouble handling the Up-and-Over in rapid sequence. She was a creature without soul, a reflection of the popular view of what silth were.

Kerath studied the silth while they were aboard. They were cold creatures, but her taste of the amber drink, of flying with the darkship, had sensitized her to subtle nuances. Even the failed Mistress was frightened of the other.

Days rolled away. Kerath was tugged this way and that. It would be so simple to abort the mission, equally easy to loose the darkwar and blind herself to the harvest that must follow. Or equally difficult. Either way, she would live in infamy in the legends of the Meth, as she who was afraid to save the race, or as she who had destroyed everything gained in generations free of the silth. She saw no middle road—unless Suslov's gunners got lucky.

Dreamkeeper, last of the great warships of the Meth, was creeping toward home system. Whose dream would it preserve?

VII

Kerath turned her back on screens and tank. "Scan on the asteroid?"

"In the groove, Marshal. Three days until it's too late to divert."

She turned to see if the silth had sent an observer. They had: the talker. From a place of power and honor she had fallen to go-between. Kerath almost pitied her. She had suffered that decline

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herself after Snow-No-More, until the Command had needed her for another suicidal operation.

"Tight beam to the Command. Full report. Request update and instructions." She went to the silth. "Could your people divert the asteroid past the point where it's no longer possible for technology to do so?"

The silth looked at her with empty eyes. "No."

"Thank you." So. There was very little time to decide. The darkship strike had to be launched soon if there was to be time left for reshaping the asteroid's orbit. But for now she could only await the Command's reaction to what had happened in the deep.

She fell asleep and dreamed worse nightmares than ever before. The commander awakened her.

"Reply from the Command. Proceed with mission."

"That's all?"

"That's it."

"No shock? Commander, would the silth have collaborators there?"

The commander eyed the screens. "I've wondered about that since I visited the human ship. I think so. I can't picture the Command jumping into anything blind."

"My own impression. That means I'm more a pawn than I thought. Perhaps I was supposed to be converted."

"Have you decided? I'll follow your orders even if they contradict the Command's apparent intent."

"Thank you. I won't be long." Kerath moved away. She wanted to pace, but there wasn't room. She chewed a claw and searched for a middle road.

She had little choice about the strike itself. It had to go on. The question was how to ensure that the silth did not survive. She checked the observer from the corner of her eye. The silth was watching intently. This would be delicate. Timing would be critical. "Commander, are we in enemy detection?"

"I don't believe so, Marshall. They would have reacted."

Of course. Suslov would want to finish *Dreamkeeper*, definitely as a symbolic move, possibly to retaliate for ships recently lost.

She turned slightly and examined enemy positions estimated from data squirted in with Command's message. "Prepare to launch the strike."

The silth turned and glided out.

"Commander, tight beam to Suslov's flagship. I want the Admiral himself. Quickly."

"This will reveal our position, Marshall."

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"So be it. Quickly, now. Quickly." Kerath grabbed a young male. "Go stand by the hatch. Watch for the silth." She turned. "I want the docking bay on screen. What's holding that link, Commander?"

"Have to find a target first, Marshall."

"Don't waste time." Kerath faced the screens. Someone had keyed into an eye cell overlooking the entrance to silth quarters. Kerath watched the observer enter.

She could not remain still. Somehow, movement was soothing.

Ping!

"We have a beam lock on a human ship, Marshall."

"It had better be the right one," Kerath murmured. The silth were leaving their quarters. All seven turned toward the docking bay. Kerath released a long sigh.

"... Corps Marshall Kerath Hadon for Vice Admiral Pyotr Suslov, personal access only urgent," the commander said loudly, as if volume could make up for her difficulty in speaking the alien language.

Suslov's rumpled face appeared with gratifying swiftness. "Kerath. I thought I smelled your touch in that breakout." He exposed his teeth. She reminded herself that humans considered that a pleasantry. "Why haven't they hung you out yet? Calling to surrender? It's almost too late."

"I want to offer you the opportunity you gave me before Snow-No-More. I hope you have more sense than I had."

"Really? You're going to hurt me with one ship?"

"One ship like nothing in human experience, Pyotr Suslov. Conscience forces me to advise you to depart."

The sentry called, "She's coming back, Marshall."

"Pyotr Suslov. Key darkwar your Meth history tapes. Out. Secure, Commander." She faced the screen relaying events in the docking bay. The silth were aboard their darkship. The titanium dagger floated away from the docking grappels. Camera and screen were unable to relay the true intensity of the golden nimbus surrounding the darkship, but Kerath felt its power in some remote recess of being still touched by the amber fluid.

She went to meet the silth. "Darkship ready?"

"Yes." The female's voice was hollow. Failure had emptied her.

"The enemy have a saying, sister. They also serve who stand and wait." The attempt at comfort fell flat. For silth there were no shadow gradients between success and failure. Kerath gestured. "Launch the darkship, Commander."

The commander hit an alarm. It honked throughout the vast

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warship. "Commencing darkship strike. All personnel take combat stations."

The docking bay screen relayed the cry of klaxons warning of decompression under way. The titanium dagger rotated until its blade faced the bay door.

"Decompression complete, Commander."

"Open the bay door."

Everything went so slowly. Every detail registered on Kerath, even the tiny groan of scraping metal, conducted through the fabric of the ship, as the bay door moved.

It was just a third of the way open when the darkship surged out into the night. On visual, the darkship dwindled rapidly. Such a tiny thing to be so deadly, not a thousandth the mass of *Dreamkeeper*. Kerath faced the tank. Detection had the darkship moving away fast. "She's in a hurry," Kerath whispered to the commander.

"Maybe she enjoys her work."

Four red alien blips were moving toward *Dreamkeeper*. Kerath beckoned the silth observer. "You'll have a better perspective from down here."

She had racked her brain trying to figure how the darkship would locate its targets without radio. She now understood. The Mistress of the Ship had mind-to-mind contact with her unshipped sister on *Dreamkeeper*'s bridge. That was why the silth had taken her into space. They had meant her to become their contact until the slow sister's unshipping made her redundant.

Mind to mind. More silth sorcery. No capability surprised Kerath now, not since she had seen the dead ship.

The observer descended to the operations deck. She did nothing to support or refute Kerath's suspicion or to acknowledge her aid.

"Up-and-Over," a tech announced.

VIII

"Four," the silth whispered.

That was the last of the outbound hunters. *Dreamkeeper* was safe for the moment.

What state was Suslov in, after losing contact with four heavy warships? How would she respond in similar circumstances?

She would get the hell out. But she was Meth, and she knew about darkwar from old legends. Suslov would examine his Meth

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historical data and scoff. Being human, he was sure to delay too long.

"Up-and-Over."

A moment later, the silth murmured, "Five. She is well named."

"What?" Kerath was startled by the gratuitous remark.

"She Walks in Glory."

"Ah. Commander, it'll be a while. I feel the need to roam. I'm on pager three if I'm needed."

"Very well, Marshall."

She stopped at her quarters briefly, collected her sidearm, then went on to a weapons observation bubble high on *Dreamkeeper*'s humped back. She chased the weaponry technicians out and stood there staring at the stars. A part of her yearned for another darkship experience. A part sobbed for the sentients dying down near the sun of the Meth.

Colored cutouts flickered at the edge of her vision, legacy of the amber drink. The silth sisters must see them all the time. She forgot *Dreamkeeper* and tried to bring those-who-dwell into focus. Success opened her to a trickle of screams from down near the homeworld.

The cutouts faded. She was not silth. She faced the cold, colorless stars, the stars she loved, the stars that would be lost to the Meth if she made one misstep traversing her middle road.

She took one deep breath for courage and started the long walk back to the fighting bridge.

"Status?" she demanded as she entered.

"Fourteen gone, Marshall," the commander replied in a tight voice. "The silth says the darkship suffered slight damage by catching the edge of a particle beam. Suslov seems to have developed an attack profile. He'll get her if she doesn't control her silth arrogance."

"Fifteen."

"Tell her not to underestimate the alien, silth," Kerath said.

"Marshall, here's an anomaly," the commander said.

Kerath stepped over to study the tank. "He's jumping out," she whispered, excited. "Those look like long jump lines. He's running, Commander."

"He'll come back."

Kerath controlled her emotions. "Of course. But maybe he'll be more amenable when he does."

"The High Lord will be pleased."

"Sarcasm, Commander? The High Lord lives numbered days.

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His clique are walking worm food." Including her sire, she thought. Poor Shadar, doomed though he was but a servant.

"There goes the last squadron, Marshall. Can the silth follow them?"

"No. Commander, in the next few minutes I'll need absolute obedience. Yes?" She turned to the silth's touch.

"She's hit, Marshall. The last attack. One of her bath was killed."

"Bath?"

"The females who help. Bath. She will have difficulty returning."

Bless the All, Kerath thought. "Medical team and damage control people to docking bay, Commander."

"Thank you," the silth said. The words seemed to rip themselves from her hidden self.

"Up-and-Over," a detection technician called.

Kerath drew her handgun and shot the startled silth through the heart. "Order here!" she shouted, as panic hit the bridge. "Order. Full battle alert, Commander. I want that darkship under fire the instant it reappears. Somebody get rid of this body. Send a security party to arrest the other two silth."

The commander executed orders in a daze. "What are you doing, Marshall?"

"Ensuring the failure of the silth design. The All favored us by taking one of her crew. She will have less control. Less ability to resist the vacuum. By firing upon her I prevent her from coming aboard, reaching safety, and finding a replacement bath. Maybe I'll destroy her. Maybe not."

"She'll attack us."

"She can't send the cloud against us. She can't destroy *Dreamkeeper* without destroying herself."

The commander looked puzzled. "Can't she Up-and-Over home and let one of the orbital tugs pick her up?"

"She doesn't know where home is, Commander, not without somebody here to tell her. To reach homeworld she first has to get orbital data from us and translate it into something understandable by those-who-dwell. To survive she has to come here and has to get inside. I don't intend to let her."

The commander nodded. After a few seconds she said, "But you would have done this even if she were returning healthy."

"Yes. I sought a middle road between surrender and a return of the silth. This was the best I could do."

"They'll make a villain of you."

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"They would in any case. That's why they sent a loser of battles who always came home a hero. This time they gave me one they thought I couldn't win no matter what."

"Darkship is here, Marshall. Headed for docking bay."

Kerath nodded.

"Commence firing," the commander directed.

IX

Swords of fire flailed the dark. The darkship reeled, slid sideways. Something in Kerath's backbrain buzzed. She saw the darkship as a glowing, tumbling cross. One arm flew off, chased by a golden shape grabbing wildly at nothing. The silth bath's deathwail burned through the core of her mind.

You traitor.

Kerath wobbled under the impact of the mental blow.

You have betrayed your sisters.

The Mistress of the Ship! She couldn't be alive. Nothing could come through that fury . . . *I am not silth!* she cried back.

The darkship straightened up and turned its daggertip toward *Dreamkeeper*. Bright paper cutouts swirled around it. A black cloud slithered across the stars behind it. Panicky, Kerath shouted, "Commander, destroy that damned ship!"

"I'm trying, Marshall. I'm trying." Terror haunted the commander's eyes.

"Then jump, dammit. It's a short jump to Biter orbit. Leave her out here."

The commander stabbed a finger at the jump operators. "Program it."

Kerath stared at the screens, transfixed. The darkship was coming in, accelerating, a screaming, flaming sword. A skeleton rode its tip, jaws opened wide, blood trailing from its fangs. A hungry darkness coiled behind its hollow eyes. The silth was insane. She meant to board by ramming!

Alarms sounded. Collision alarms, never heard except during drills. "Jump, Commander. Dammit, jump anywhere."

The darkship kept accelerating.

Jump alarms shrilled a five-second warning—just as the darkship reached *Dreamkeeper*'s fat guppy belly.

The warship began to twist with the impact. Torn metal shrieked. Breech alarms wailed. Kerath watched the burning

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blade drive deeper and deeper into the great vessel's belly. "No," she breathed. The silth had lost control and come in far too hard.

A tendril of the black cloud touched the ship.

Then *Dreamkeeper* finally jumped, carrying the darkship with it, still boring into its guts.

Crew people added their screams to those of the alarms, responding to the instant of cloud-touch. On the fighting bridge they clawed their scalps and smashed their foreheads against their consoles. Below, where the darkship's momentum still drove it deeper into *Dreamkeeper*'s belly, it was worse. They were clawing at their eyes.

Dreamkeeper rolled out of jump. Kerath glanced at the readouts. Orbit around homeworld. Almost perfect . . . Only then did she realize that the blackness had barely caressed her. The silth drink had prepared her for that, too.

The comm boards began lighting up, announcing incoming traffic. Kerath ignored them. She listened. No sound came from below. The darkship had come to rest. "Commander!" She swung hard. "Snap out of it." She exaggerated. "We're in a decaying orbit."

The glaze left the commander's eyes. She scanned the bridge. "Internal pressure is down, but the collision doors have maintained integrity. Help me shake these people out of it. We've got to get moving. The ship is in a bad way." She surveyed the available data again. "We will be lucky to save it."

"We'll save it, Commander. We have no choice. We have to shunt that asteroid."

"That's the Command channel screaming over there."

"To hell with Command. We don't have time for them."

Getting the bridge crew back to work was not difficult, but there was trouble down in the collision area. Half the crew there was dead. The rest had to be restrained for their own protection. Officers culled every department for extra bodies.

Kerath went down, donned an eva suit, and combed the wreckage for the Mistress of the Ship. She refused to be satisfied until she found a mass of torn, raw meat and fur in tatters of black near the head of the column of scrap that had been a darkship.

An hour passed before Kerath was sure that *Dreamkeeper* would survive—if nothing else went sour. She returned to the bridge and collapsed into the first seat she found vacant.

The Command was still trying to get through. By now, they would have studied the damage optically from the surface. They

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could guess that the darkship had rammed. They would be thinking up cruel replies to her middle-road venture.

Detection showed a number of small vessels closing in—coming to look *Dreamkeeper* over, of course, maybe to put a representative of the Command aboard.

She did not much care now.

"Route that Command call to this board, please," she said. "I might as well face them now."

"Sure you want to deal with them?" the commander asked. "I can . . . "

"There's no getting out of it." Kerath stabbed a button.

A weathered old female appeared on screen, growling and snarling. Kerath allowed the storm to run its course. When it slackened, and she could pull the main thread from the skein of complaints, she decided that the Command was more interested in the fate of the silth than in Kerath Hadon or *Dreamkeeper*.

"Here's our silth insider," Kerath whispered to the commander.

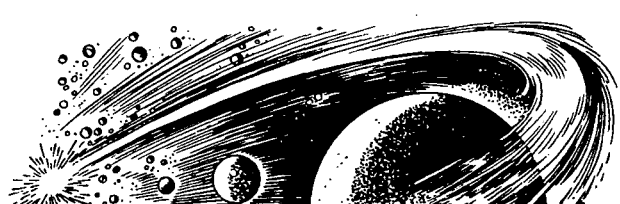
"The Supreme Commander. I suppose it had to be."

Kerath was exhausted, but she had enough anger and outrage left to respond. She depressed the send key and shouted a line spoken by a victorious pup to conclude a popular story told to small Meth. "The grauken is dead."

The Commander revealed her teeth. She was amused. She keyed into the Command net herself. "Command, this is *Dreamkeeper*. Confirm that last from mission officer Kerath. The grauken is dead." Off comm, she added, "They can't court-martial everybody."

Kerath leaned back, closed her eyes, and said, "Secure outside comm. Commander, we'll let them wonder what we meant. The grauken is dead. I wriggled away again." She had found the middle road.

But middle roads went nowhere. They just bought time. Suslov would return. The silth would persist. But there was time now, precious time, to buttress the bridge she had begun to build. ●



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LETTERS

Dear Readers,

We're ashamed of you! Such glee—such unbounded joy at having caught the esteemed Martin Gardner in an error! Frankly, we're shocked. In our August issue, we printed Mr. Gardner's puzzle, "Fingers and Colors on Chromo." Not being mathematicians ourselves, and being inclined to believe whatever Martin Gardner says about numbers, we published the puzzle without questioning the solution. Martin Gardner is one of the world's foremost recreational mathematics experts, after all, and far be it from us to check up on him. At any rate, the final problem in this puzzle was apparently somewhat garbled. We expected to receive some mail on this once the problem was pointed out to us, but never did we expect what we got. One fellow sent us an inch-thick computer printout that-which "identified all the prime and composite numbers from 2 through 10,000, found the prime factors of every composite number, all the pairwise factors of the composites, discarded the redundant one, tested the unique pairwise factorings to see how many passed the test, and for every number that could only be factored in one way that met the criterion, printed out the number, its prime factorings, and the unique one that met the criterion." Ahem.

Another reader sent us a letter that posed a problem on page one and then asked us to turn to page three of the letter for the solution. Of course page three then led us elsewhere in the letter. Some of you are *so* amusing!

What follows is poor Mr. Gardner's confession, apology, and correct solution. He's a broken man, readers. We hope you're satisfied.

The Editors

CORRECTION

The last problem of August's puzzle, "Fingers and Colors on Chromo," was hopelessly garbled. I should have stated the problem like this:

Assume that more than one Chromo are in a room. Every Chromo has at least one finger on each hand, and all Chromos have the same number of fingers. The total number of fingers in the room is more than 200 and less than 300. If you knew the exact number of fingers in the room, you could deduce exactly how many Chromos are in the room. How many are there, and how many fingers does each have?

The only number of fingers that, if known, permits a unique solution is 289, the square of the prime 17. Consequently, the room contains 17 Chromos with 17 fingers

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each. David A. Davidson was the first of many readers to send a correct version of the problem.

Dear Editor,

Since Dr. A has been my personal hero for many years, I have been diligently hunting for his magazine for a long time. Seems to be scarce out here in the Bay Area.

I finally found it, however, and find it fascinating. I would comment on two things: primarily, thank you, Good Dr., for the light touch, and long may it wave! The world needs more and larger servings of it! Secondly, you seem to be encouraging new writers to contribute more than anyone ever has (to my knowledge). Swig it down and smash the glasses! But please don't mind if I say that the *first* things I read are your column and your comments in the letter column. Can I help it if you are an exciting person??

Ginny Kolecka
115 Daisy Ct.,
Hercules, CA.

I don't even want you to help it, Ginny. Just take advantage of all that excitement. Serve me right.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor;

In your July 1982 issue (page 20), Baird Searles commented: "Science fiction and faith are a difficult mix, at which only C. S. Lewis has been successful."

This is totally erroneous. To refute it, I need only cite *Ark of Venus*, by Clyde B. Clason (Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). This science-fiction juvenile stayed in print for twenty years and would probably still be selling had not my imagined Venus turned out to be so much at variance with the Venus revealed by space probes.

A far more notable example is *Daughter of Is*, by Michael Davidson (Popular Library, 1978), a novel so magnificent in scope that all other science fiction pales into insignificance beside it.

Stories in which computers have usurped the functions of God are so commonplace that the theme has become boring. The two best examples, for my money, are *The Jesus Incident*, by Frank Herbert and Bill Ransom (Berkeley Publishing Corp., 1979), and *Mayflies*, by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr. (Berkeley Publishing Corp., 1979).

Those of us fortunate enough to be contemporary to the *Lensman* epic of the 1930s and 1940s can never forget the eons-lasting battle of E. E. Smith's Arisians and Eddorians for the control of two galaxies. What's probably not well known is that "Doc" Smith's basic theme has strong religious undertones.

Zoroaster (660–583 B.C.) taught that the spiritual world was in delicate balance between Ahura Mazda, Lord of Light, and Angra Mainyu, Mazda's exact opposite. Neither could prevail against the other until Mazda took the calculated risk of creating men and sending Zoroaster to persuade them to enlist on his side. This doctrine led to the idea of God and Satan locked in eternal conflict, a concept not found in the Torah. It's interesting to note, however, that the Jews were carried into Babylonian captivity during the lifetime of Zo-

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roaster and released from it shortly after the prophet's death. Cyrus the Great, their rescuer, was himself a Zoroastrian. Obviously, the Devil has a history at least six centuries older than Christ.

If you lump fantasy in with science fiction, what better example of the God-Satan conflict can be found than *The Wounded Land* and others of its ilk by Stephen R. Donaldson? Incidentally, Donaldson's *The One Tree* was recently listed as second on the New York *Times* fiction best-seller list. I haven't seen it reviewed in Asimov's mag and probably won't.

Clyde B. Clason
York, PA

Baird Searles, like any reviewer, is expressing his opinion, and de gustibus non est disputandum. *However, it is always good to have a contrary opinion, and I especially like to see a writer coming to the defense of his own work. I do it frequently.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor;

This morning's mail brought the July issue of *IAsfm*. Leafed through it and read "UP FRONT". Have been going to write for some time. Will do so now to prolong my anticipation of this issue.

Your analysis of the letters squares with my reactions to the magazine: there is too much fantasy. (This situation seems to be changing. Last year only about forty percent of the contents could be called SF, but this year the ratio has reversed.) There is a proper amount of humor, hard science, and poetry. The puzzles are very good. The mixture of famous names and unknowns is excellent. And we definitely need a lot more Asimov. The best thing about this issue is that, for the second time this year, there is no space wasted on Sucharitkul, whose stuff is never science fiction, usually incoherent, and rarely in story form.

I have been a voracious SF reader since the early thirties, but this is my first letter to the editor (some of us are just not as quick to respond as others). Over the years the quantity of SF available has steadily decreased, but (thank Manitou) the quality has increased geometrically. I personally believe that one of the reasons for this is that women are no longer constrained to hide behind masculine pen names, writing thud & blunder space operas, thus freeing both men and women to write real thoughts and feelings as real people. I first subscribed to *IAsfm* at the end of 1979 due to difficulty in finding it on the stands and expect to keep renewing for a long time.

Timothy Orr
Detroit, MI

Well, with Shawna running this magazine, you can be pretty sure there isn't likely to be any return to male chauvinism here, in any case. And a good thing, too.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I've finally decided to write you a letter in comment to your July issue of *IAsfm*.

First, I like the layout of the Books section. Making the transi-

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tion from one book to another is much easier with the title and author at the beginning of each section instead of having them all lumped together in a big list.

Second, I have been enjoying the stories by Somtow Sucharitkul and found myself going through withdrawal when he didn't appear in the June or July issues. I realize he has to write and submit a story before you can publish one (unless you have a time machine handy), but could you please get some more soon?

Third, I liked your "Profile," but I found reading all that nonfiction to be an awesome task. Seriously, I am looking forward to more of these.

Lynette R. Fletcher

Profiles are Good Things, in my opinion. When SF personalities remain hidden behind their writings, there is a tendency to think of them as nonhuman, somehow. Many a reader, on being introduced to me, has looked upon my twinkling blue eyes and merry smile with such enormous relief on her pretty face, that —but let's go on to the next letter.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Editor:

Last year I was fortunate to do a telephone interview with Isaac Asimov as part of the programming for a southern convention (Asficon 2). Reading the Good Doctor's editorial in the June 1982 *IAsfm* brought back to mind one of his earlier comments made during that interview. When asked if today's anti-science/technology feelings are any worse than what the country has seen in the past, he answered: "There is more reason to be worried now, because, for one thing, television does offer a magnificent way of rallying the forces of bigotry and darkness." We were mainly talking about the Moral Majority.

Well, after reading about the kooks over at *Fusion* magazine in Asimov's recent editorial, I can only say that I'm glad *they* don't have their own TV channel. We in science fiction are used to being attacked by all types of know-nothings, but what makes this particular group so objectionable is that they have the temerity to wrap themselves in the cloak of science!!! Then they turn around and attack virtually every scientist (as well as all the SF authors) they can find, when they aren't raving about the secret conspiracy of the British.

I am impressed by the good humor with which Asimov took this latest piece of lunacy. But make no mistake: those folks are potentially just as dangerous as the other forces of bigotry and darkness.

Brad Linaweaver
Atlanta, GA

One of the sad things about humanity is that there is no point of view, however lunatic, that does not find disciples who are ready to die for it. That statement of mine was once quoted in a long, long report containing many criticisms of a particular lunacy, and when the disciples replied, one and all denounced my statement and ignored everything else. From which I deduce that I hit a nerve.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Editor:

Any magazine that publishes both humorous and serious poetry can't be all bad.

The Profile of Alvin Toffler was a great idea. Can we have more of these things? All we readers want is everything.

At present I don't agree with Toffler's idea that things might be better if technology were put up to popular vote. He didn't quite say that. But the public would probably vote worse than the elite: mostly "no" to anything new. I teach in a community college and am appalled at the number of people who would rather trust in the con game of astrology than figure out life for themselves. On the other hand, there are many excellent individuals.

Group decisions are influenced by profit motive, which may be good, and by political pressure, intimidation by fellow members, public opinion, the press, pressure of time, health, the latest magazine article, preconceived standards, and a host of other things—not all of them always counterproductive but usually so.

The best solution to world problems is to give me divine power. I'd have a ball—then a headache!

Rosco Wright
5020 Saratoga
Eugene, OR 97405

Dear Doctor and Company;

What is this?! Baird Searles (On Books, *IAsfm*, July 1982) states that only C.S. Lewis has been successful in combining religion and science fiction?! Blasphemy!!! What of Miller's *Canticle for Leibowitz*, Moorcock's *Behold the Man*, Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, etc. It is too bad he did not first review Clifford Simak's *Project Pope* instead of *Special Deliverance*.

Now to retire from my picking of nits: July *IAsfm* was a fine issue, with Gregory Benford, Madeleine E. Robins, and John Ford especially enjoyable. And what a treat! A story by the Good Doctor himself! Let us support Kathleen Moloney in her efforts to keep the doctor prolific. In closing, "Mooney's Module" is a welcome addition to the magazine, and I look forward to more. Keep up the good work.

David Stuart
Redondo Beach, CA

NEXT ISSUE

The January issue of *IAsfm* will feature a Viewpoint article by author and editor Terry Carr on "how to write science fiction without knowing much about science." We'll also have "Fusing and Refusing," Part Two of John Brunner's book *The Crucible of Time*. We're sure this story will be as enjoyable as Part One, "The Fire is Lit" which we published in our September issue. There will also be stories by Brian Aldiss, James Killus, Skip Wall and others. On sale December 21, 1982.

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SINGLE? Meet that special person—anywhere! Very low fees. DATELINE, 316 Fifth Ave., New York 10001, (212) 889-3230 or (312) 523-2100 or (213) 854-0640.

SINGLE? Widowed? Divorced? Nationwide introductions! Hundreds of sincere members! All Ages! Free information! Write: Identity, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, Michigan 48068.

PRIVATE Address, for your Personal Correspondence. Confidential Services. Professional Mail Forwarding, Box 561-H, Milton, MA 02186.

SCANDINAVIAN Ladies, 18-68, sincere, seek correspondence, friendship, marriage. Details: Scannaclub, Dept: C03, POB 4, Pittsford, NY 14534. (Please enclose stamp).

ASIAN GIRLS, beautiful, delightful. Pen pals. Photos, send stamp: Yumifriends, Dept. A, P.O. Box 5657, Berkeley, CA 94705.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

LONELY? Meet new friends. Send large SASE. D. Dunn, 1626 Wilcox #627, Hollywood, CA 90028.

PHOTOGRAPHY—PHOTOFINISHING

SAVE HUNDREDS OF DOLLARS!!!! Make your own S & M Densitometer. Send $5.00 for detailed drawings and instructions. Order direct: S & M Instruments, Dept. IA12, 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

RADIO & TELEVISION

CABLE TV DESCRAMBLERS and CONVERTERS. PLANS and PARTS. Build or Buy. For information send $2.00. C&D Electronics, P.O. Box 21, Jenison, MI 49428.

RECORDS, TAPES & SOUND EQUIPMENT

FREE Promotional albums, concert tickets, stereos, etc. Information: Barry Publications, 477 82nd Street, Brooklyn, NY 11209.

SONGWRITERS

POEMS WANTED. Songs recorded and published. Radio-TV promotions. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 33578.

SONGWRITERS: Exciting offer! Poems, songs needed. Free evaluation. Creative Music Productions, Box 1943-A12, Houston, TX 77001.

SONGWRITERS. The Guild was organized 28 years ago to help writers produce good songs and sell them. National Songwriters Guild, 2421 Walnut Rd., Pontiac, MI 48057.

SUPPORT YOUR LOCAL BOOKSTORE

MOONSTONE BOOKCELLARS, INC., 2145 PENN. AVE., NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20037. WASHINGTON'S ONLY SCIENCE AND MYSTERY SPECIALTY BOOKSHOP. 202-659-2600.

UNUSUAL BOOKS

THE INTELLIGENCE LIBRARY: Many unique books & official manuals on RESTRICTED subjects — Bugging, Wiretapping, Locksmithing, Covert Investigation, & MUCH MORE. Free brochures, MENTOR, DP, 135-53 No. Blvd., Flushing, N.Y. 11354.

PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR FICTION COMBINATIONS:
Mystery, Sci-Fi, or Special

Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.
For further information write to R. S. Wayner, Classified Ad Director, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

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ASIMOV's
SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ISAAC ASIMOV'S MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department/Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

20 WORD MINIMUM
Only $24.00 for 20 Words or Less
$1.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME _____

FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ **STATE** _____ **ZIP** _____

PHONE: _____ **DATE:** _____

YOUR SIGNATURE _____

_____ Words at $1.20 each $.....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each _____
Total amount for 1 ad $

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $.....
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85
(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example: One 20 word ad $24.00 x 3 months = $72.00 x .85 = $61.20)

$ _____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$24.00**	(2) **$24.00**	(3) **$24.00**	(4) **$24.00**	(5) **$24.00**
(6) **$24.00**	(7) **$24.00**	(8) **$24.00**	(9) **$24.00**	(10) **$24.00**
(11) **$24.00**	(12) **$24.00**	(13) **$24.00**	(14) **$24.00**	(15) **$24.00**
(16) **$24.00**	(17) **$24.00**	(18) **$24.00**	(19) **$24.00**	(20) **$24.00**
(21) **$25.20**	(22) **$26.40**	(23) **$27.60**	(24) **$28.80**	(25) **$30.00**
(26) **$31.20**	(27) **$32.40**	(28) **$33.60**	(29) **$34.80**	(30) **$36.00**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ISAAC ASIMOV'S MAGAZINE**

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

There aren't too many con(vention)s over the holidays, so this is a chance to take a look at next year's social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped envelope) at 9850 Fairfax Sq. #232, Fairfax VA 22031. (703) 273-6111 is the hot line. If a machine answers, leave your area code and number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send a #10 SASE when writing cons. For free listings, I need to know about your con at least six months ahead. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

NOVEMBER, 1982

26-28—**Darkover Grand Council Meeting.** For info, write: **308 W. Duval, Philadelphia PA 19144.** Or phone **(203) 742-5417** (10 am to 10 pm only, not collect). Con will be held in: Wilmington DE (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Radisson. Guests will include: Don & E. (DAW) Wollheim, M. Z. Bradley, P. E. Zimmer, K. Kurtz, M. Rogers, J. Lichtenberg, H. Shapero.

26-28—**LosCon.** Sheraton Universal Hotel, Los Angeles CA. Poul Anderson, Milt Stevens. The LA con.

26-28—**BayCon.** Red Lion Inn, San Jose CA. G. Wolfe, K. Freas, M. Jittlov, L. Dowling, F. Catalano.

JANUARY, 1983

14-16—**PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101.** C. J. (Faded Sun) Cherryh, artist Carl Lundgren.

14-16—**ChattaCon, Box 921, Hixon TN 37343. (615) 479-8119 or 842-4363.** Chattanooga TN Jerry ("Oath of Fealty") Pournelle, W. A. (Bob) Tucker, Robert (Horseclans) Adams, Sharon Webb, Doug Chaffee, Jerry Page. The 8th edition of this traditional Southern con. Very congenial vibes.

14-16—**CostumeCon, c/o Fantasy Costumers Guild, Box 1947, Spring Valley CA 90277.** Two (count 'em) two masquerades (SF & fantasy — historical), banquet fashion show. For costume enthusiasts.

FEBRUARY, 1983

4-6—**OmniCon, Box 970308, Miami FL 33197.** Long-time fans Bjo Trimble & Dave Kyle, Peter Davison, artist Michael Whelan, Robert ("Mythconceptions") Asprin. A good excuse to go south.

4-6—**VikingCon, c/o SF&F Club, W. Wash. U., Bellingham WA 98225.** Costumes, cantina, space doings.

4-6—**RaCon, 77 Baron's Ct. Terr., Edinburgh EH8 7EN, Scotland, UK.** Harry Harrison, fan Peter Lyon.

11-13—**TallyCon, c/o Crusoe, 213 Great Lakes Rd., Tallahassee FL 32301.** Gordon R. (Dorsai) Dickson, Kelly & Polly Freas. The second annual edition. Another chance to go south to escape Winter.

18-20—**Boskone, c/o NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** The biggest SF con on the East Coast.

18-21—**ConstellationCon, Box 15-805, Cecil Blogg Dr., Victoria BC V9C 3H8 Canada.** Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm, Bjo Trimble, Jerry Pournelle & Larry Niven ("Oath of Fealty"), Syd Mead. No connection with the WorldCon in Baltimore later. At the Empress & Harbor Towers Hotels.

SEPTEMBER, 1983

1-5—**ConStellation, Box 1046, Baltimore MD 21203.** John (Zanzibar) Brunner, D. Kyle, Jack (Well of Souls) Chalker. The 1983 WorldCon. Go to smaller cons if you can to prepare. Join in 1982 for $30 ($10 to vote on Hugo awards, get publications, etc., without attending). Costs more later.

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